You call That Service?
6
Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by
Hiroki Ozaki

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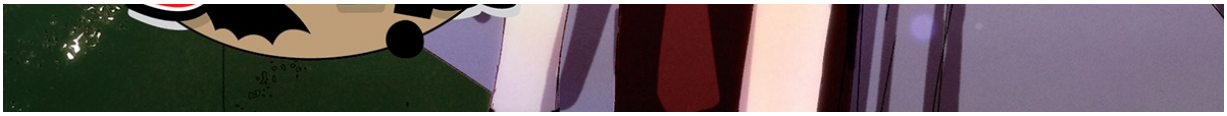
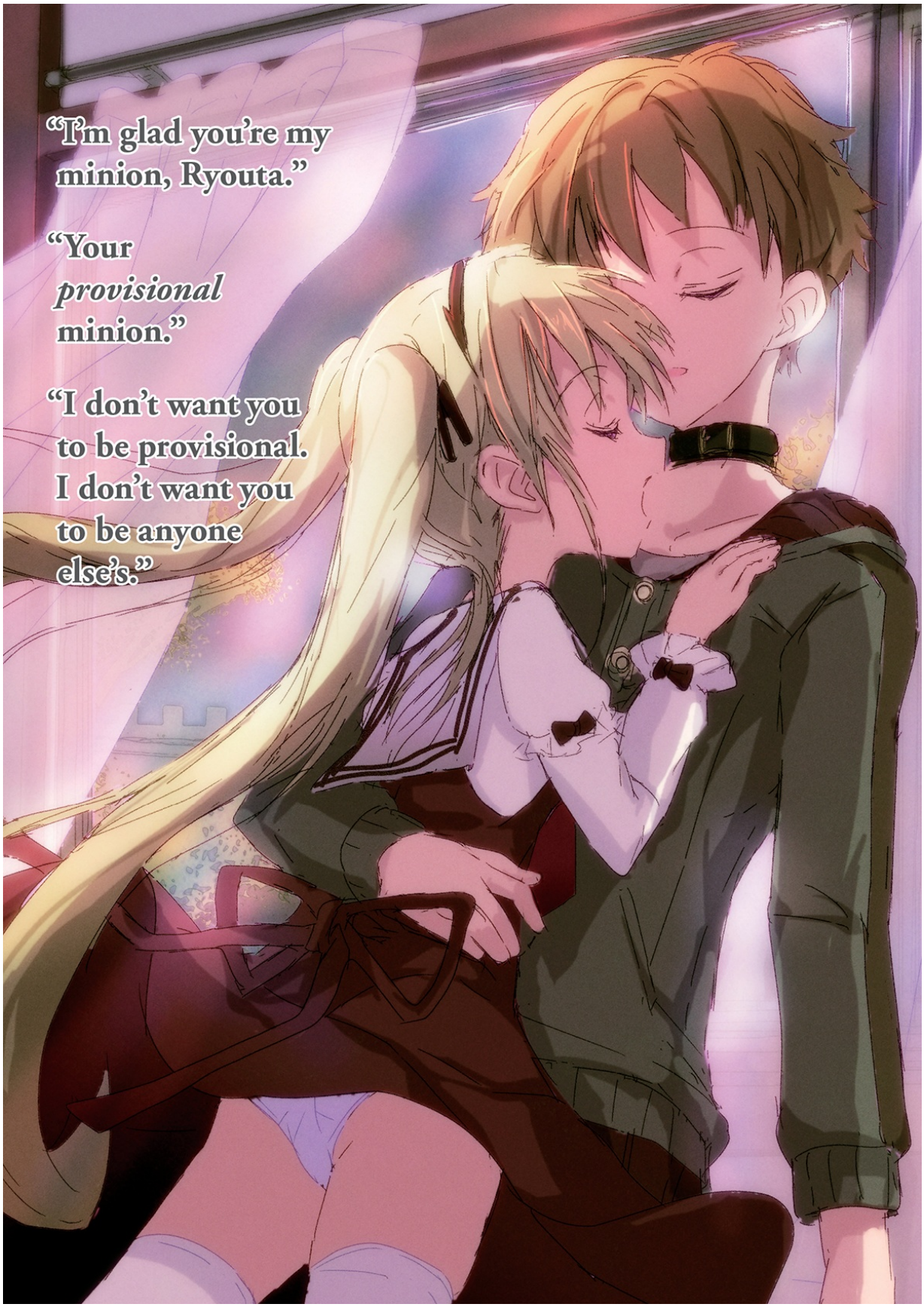
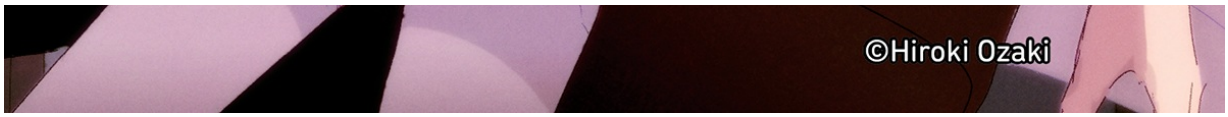
You call That Service




"I'm glad you're my minion, Ryouta."
"Your *provisional* minion."
"I don't want you to be provisional. I don't want you to be anyone else's."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“It smells… like…Lady Ouka…”
“Hey— Sasara! Don’t take…any more off… Ah…”

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You Call That a Locked Room?

Kiyomizu Jouryuuji

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Illustration by
HIROKI OZAKI

YEN ON
New York

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Kisetsu Morita

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt
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You call That Service?

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Characters

Ryouta Asagiri

A second-year high school student who wandered into the Sacred Blood Empire. He is cursed to be extremely attractive to human females. He became Shiren's minion and now lives with her.

Shiren Fuyukura

There was some distance between Shiren and her older sister, the emperor, because Shiren is the daughter of someone suspected of assassinating the previous emperor, but they recently made up. Ryouta's master.

Ouka Sarano

The current emperor, who claimed independence from Japan for the Sacred Blood Empire. Shiren's big sister. An old friend of Ryouta's from elementary school.

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PROLOGUE

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PROLOGUE

Let's go back two years.

Ouen Sarano's plans to reinstate the Sacred Blood Empire had entered the final countdown before implementation.

At this point, a good handful of Sacred Blooded had come to live in Akinomiya. They were, of course, agents in the movement for independence.

Once Ouen, the leader, gave the signal, all would rise to action. And by the end of the day, Akinomiya would become the Sacred Blood Empire. The Sacred Blooded, who had vanished into the shadows of history, were one step away from obtaining their long-cherished hope: their own country.

All that was left to determine was how long they needed to wait, so that their chances of success could be as high as possible. Failure was not an option.

The schedule was worked out in painstaking detail, and at last, they settled on their day of revolution.

But right before revolution came, there was an incident.

Someone had murdered Ouen Sarano.

And his lover, Sairi Sarano, had abruptly vanished.

Soon after, it was revealed that she was Sairi *Fuyukura*, a spy for the Virginal Father.

The upper echelons of the empire worked frantically to salvage the situation.

They were at a critical moment that would decide whether their country could be restored, or if it would be forever lost.

First, though there was no evidence against her, Sairi Fuyukura was publicly declared as the person who had killed the emperor. And her daughter with the emperor—Shiren Sarano—was demoted to a commoner and became Shiren Fuyukura.

If the nobles were to act mindlessly on their hatred for Sairi, it would

only wreck all their carefully laid plans. At that point, even if they had found Sairi, it wouldn't contribute anything to the creation of their country. And so the leaders prevented the situation from becoming worse by making her daughter their scapegoat.

Meanwhile, Ouka Sarano, the emperor's eldest daughter and successor, would rule as the legal emperor. She was daughter to Ominaeshi, his legal wife, so her lineage was fully acceptable.

The only problem was that she was still in junior high school. Could such a child guide them through this crisis? The leaders had no choice but to gamble their future on her.

That bet turned out to be a success. A huge success, in fact.

Ouka Sarano immediately got the chaos under control and decisively launched the Sacred Blooded into action two years later.

The only reason it took two years was because she had to remake the old leadership into something she could trust. In her eyes, those who had no influence aside from their noble birth were in her way. People like that would scorn her simply because she was young.

Once Ouka had solidified her position with trusted attendants, she put her plan into action.

From that day forward, the city of Akinomiya became the Sacred Blood Empire. Her blitz tactics took not a single life—it was almost beautiful.

The Empire, which seemed rather sloppy and haphazard in Ryouta's eyes, had been through many dramatic ups and downs in the past.

After some trials and tribulations, Ryouta had also worked to help Ouka and Shiren reconcile, and now the Empire was running in its own disorganized way—or so it should have been.

That is, at least, until the letter came.

My dearest Shiren,

I'm so sorry to have left you alone for so long.

We can finally have a happy life together, because I now stand at the head of the Virginal Father.

I'll be coming to get you soon.

Let's live in Japan. Together.

- Sairi Fuyukura

P.S. They opened up a fantastic pastry shop near the station. It's all you can eat for just thirteen hundred yen on a weekday! The seasonal tarts are sooo good! It's heavenly! We have to go! Five times a week! I'm telling you, it's seriously the best! I'd say it's the best in Japan! Oh, and I found a really high-quality chicken hot-pot place, and there's this thing called collagen soup? That stuff is exquisite. We have to go there. It'll make your skin shine! I also found a really good soba place! Their hours are kind of short, but it'd be so worth it to eat there! I might stick with just their soba for a while. Oh, I found an organic veggie buffet, too. It's always so crowded, but lining up for it is never a painful experience. But meat's good, too, you know? I know a place with good offal. Anyone would go carnivorous if they saw the broth they serve there (the rest omitted, as it continues for another thirty lines).

"She's basically just writing about food! Does she think this is funny?!" Shiren was furious when she finished reading. "Shoot! Now I'm hungry… We are having hot pot today, Ryouta. Soy-milk hot pot!"

"Now's not the time!"

"Right, I need to pick whether we'll top it off with udon noodles or rice! I'm feeling rice today!"

"I'm not talking about hot pot! There was something really important before all that!"

"Right, we can't ignore a good pastry. Once the chestnuts are in season, we'll get a whole lot more variety, though."

"Before that! Before that! The part that doesn't have anything to do with food!"

Like mother, like daughter. Both get distracted by the same things, Ryouta thought.

"O-oh, right… My mother said she was coming…" Shiren's expression quickly clouded over.

Indeed—despite how briefly it was mentioned, the letter came with shocking news. In terms of length, the message was overwhelmingly weighted toward food, but volume does not always translate to importance.

The essence of the letter was that Shiren's mother would be taking her back to Japan, and it was spelled out quite clearly.

Shiren quietly placed the letter on the table.

"So I'm not really sure if I should be asking this, but…I know I can't not ask you, so I'm going to."

“You don’t need to preface it like that. You’re my minion, Ryouta. Ask me what you like—but depending on what it is, I might poke your eyes.”

“Then I can’t actually ask what I like, can I?! Don’t add conditions for retaliation!”

“You can ask me about pretty much anything besides my weight. Go ahead.”

Apparently, her weight was completely off-limits.

“What do you want to do, Shiren…?”

All Ryouta knew was what had been written in the letter—Sairi’s one-sided notice to her daughter.

Of course, he had no idea how Shiren felt about it.

Shiren stared silently at the letter on the table. She looked far from ecstatic about it, but Ryouta wasn’t sure if he should say anything.

No way she could come up with an answer that quickly. I need to give her time to think…

Shiren let out a sigh. She plopped onto the sofa, an exhausted look on her face. “This isn’t about what I want to do. The Empire and Japan have no official diplomatic relations. I can’t leave for Japan.”

“I know that’s how the system works, but—”

“And can I even go back to Mo—my mother after all this time? Sairi… killed my dad.”

Sairi was a first-rate criminal. And that was precisely why Shiren had suffered for so long under the Fuyukura name.

Ryouta had become the go-between in Emperor Ouka’s and Shiren’s relationship, but until that point, Shiren had been partially treated as a criminal herself.

It went without saying that Shiren was not responsible at all. She was no murderer—she was one of the bereaved, having lost a father.

But because she was Sairi’s daughter, she had been subject to painful discrimination.

“Do you…believe all that, Shiren?”

The letter had not touched on the previous emperor’s assassination at all.

Ryouta had once looked into the incident himself.

What he’d learned was that the case had essentially stalled at circumstantial evidence. Though no one had been there to see it happen, the emperor was killed in Sairi’s room, and afterward, Sairi had vanished. So

based on those facts, the culprit was probably Sairi.

It might seem like that was enough, but it wasn't.

What if, for example, there had been another group of people looking to assassinate the emperor, and they had tried to kill both him and his lover?

And though the emperor was killed right away, his lover alone had managed to escape—wasn't that a possibility?

Or maybe a fundamentalist had tried to oust a mistress who was not of Sacred Blood?

Ryouta could think of plenty of scenarios.

But there was one powerful truth that shot down all those hypotheses.

Sairi Fuyukura was a member of the Virginal Father.

The Virginal Father was an organization that sought the demise of the Sacred Blooded. The idea that a member of this organization had killed the emperor on the eve of their revolution was much easier to grasp.

Logically, it made sense.

That's still just one-sided logic, though.

If her intent really was to kill, then would she have had a child with him, spent over a decade raising said child, then kill her husband?

I guess there's a possibility she got an order and had to kill the man she loved. But if I were in her shoes, I…couldn't do it.

Whatever the organization or ideology, would it have been important enough to make her kill her family?

If their aim was to bring the downfall of the Sacred Blooded, then she and the organization should have acted much sooner. It would have been safer to strike well before the Empire began planning their revolution. Waiting until the final hours would have left her with no room for error.

Or maybe I'm giving them too much benefit of the doubt…

Ryouta could tell from her demeanor that Shiren was feeling depressed. Her pigtails always drooped when her spirits were low.

"A-anyway…I don't want to see my mother. And living in Japan with her? Ridiculous! I'd be throwing my whole life in the Empire away!"

"That's true. You have lots of friends here, too."

Shiren would be leaving way too much behind if she left for Japan solely for her mother's sake.

"And—" Shiren hugged Ryouta tightly. "I can't bring my minion to Japan, can I? I don't want that…"

“Well, if you were going, then I’d come with y—”

“If you go back, then you’ll have a hard time because of your curse…”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that…”

Thanks to his grandfather’s curse, Ryouta was irresistible to women who weren’t Sacred Blooded.

The curse was so dangerous, in fact, that it was part of the reason why he was living in the Sacred Blood Empire. Japan was a perilous place for him. He had almost been kidnapped on more than one occasion.

“So anyway…I…don’t care about my mother… I really don’t…,” Shiren murmured, still embracing Ryouta.

But her words sounded somehow forced.

I can’t think of any kid who wouldn’t want to be reunited with their mom after being separated for so long. Well, except for me, considering my curse…

Ryouta genuinely did not want to go back to Japan. His mother had done so many things to him, even poisoning his food.

“Then without going to Japan, if you could see your mother for just a little while, would you want to?”

“M-maybe for fifteen minutes… No! I don’t want to see her! I don’t! I don’t want to see that harebrained woman who talks about food at every waking moment!”

“I think she’s passed that down to you…”

“She eats like a horse. She’s always going on about the three extra stomachs—an extra stomach for sweets, an extra stomach for snacks, and an extra stomach for midnight treats!”

“So the more powerful version of you, then.”

“She would go to the gym super early in the morning to burn all her fat so she could eat even more.”

“She wanted to eat more that badly?!”

“I told you, she’s a real glutton! I hate people like her. But her tomato porridge and her griddled tomatoes and fish were good…”

“So your obsession with tomatoes comes from your parents…”

“And whenever I asked for a snack, she would feed me tomato pancakes or tomato chocolate cake, then give me tomato tea or tomato coffee or a tomato soda float after meals… But I don’t want to see her!”

“I gotta say, her use of tomatoes makes it hard to tell if she’s a gourmet

or if her sense of taste is totally broken!”

After living here for a while, Ryouta sometimes felt that the Sacred Blooded liked tomatoes more than blood.

“But you sure were spoiled growing up, weren’t you…? Maybe that’s why you’re so haughty… But I guess you were like a princess in the past…”

“Allow me to restate my decision! I don’t want to see her! Why would I?!” Shiren said, her face red.

She did, to an extent, seem to be putting on a brave face, but even Ryouta could tell that she was conflicted on the inside.

She really did suffer… Even though it was only for a couple of years, they all still treated her like a criminal.

She must feel both love and hate in equal turns.

Furthermore, her mother might really have killed her father.

And if her mother was the culprit, would she be able to forgive her?

It was such a unique circumstance that Ryouta could hardly imagine it.

“Okay, let’s set your mother aside for now. That’s something you need to decide on your own.”

“Yes, of course. But like I said, I have an answer already.”

“We need to tell the government that you got this letter.” Ryouta figured they needed to draw a clear line between public and private affairs. “There’s a chance that the Virginal Father will attack, with Sairi at the helm. I’d say war could even break out. Are you sure Sairi even actually wrote this?”

Shiren’s face returned to its natural state.

“What do you mean, Ryouta?”

“The guys in the Virginal Father could be baiting you into a trap.”

There could still be radicals in Japan who were bent on decimating the Sacred Blooded. They couldn’t ignore the possibility that this was some kind of scheme.

“No, this is my mother’s handwriting. I know that much. If she came, she’d come alone.”

“If her daughter says so, then that’s probably right. It would certainly be better for us if the enemy isn’t sending an offensive force.”

“No… That’s not exactly right…” Shiren was shaking. “The Empire might be in its biggest bout of trouble yet…”

“Wait, you have to be exaggerating, right…?”

“Sairi isn’t just an average person… She only got to marry my dad because he wanted her power. She was his bodyguard. If not, I doubt his advisers would have allowed him to marry just any Japanese person.”

“Then the secret behind her strength was that she was a warrior for the Virginal Father…”

Yet another enemy might be closing in on them.

And this was no stranger. This was Shiren’s mother.

I really don’t want any more brushes with death…

Characters

Kiyomizu Jouryuuji

Ryouta's classmate from school in Japan, as well as his stalker. She followed him into the Sacred Blood Empire. Assassin for the Virginal Father.

Tamaki Shijou

Classmate of Shiren and Ryouta. She's typically calm and collected, but once she slips into a pessimistic mood, there's no coming back for a while.

Sasara Tatsunami

A personal guard for the emperor, Ouka. She is madly in love with her liege and will often act recklessly because of it.

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EPISODE 1

LET'S THINK OF A WAY TO COUNTER MOTHER'S ATTACK!

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EPISODE 1

LET'S THINK OF A WAY TO COUNTER MOTHER'S ATTACK!

The next day, they reported the letter to Ouka and the others.

That one piece of news sent a ruinous ripple through the Imperial court.

"Are you serious? Seriously? I mean, seriously? Are we being serious right now? Do I need to implement an urgent tax increase?" Ouka, sitting on the imperial throne, went pale. "Seriously, seriously? Can we only get through this national emergency with higher taxes? I think the people would understand if I called it a predicament tax. Now's our chance to up taxes. Send it through the roof."

"Calm down, Ouka! And stop taking advantage of these emergencies by increasing taxes!"

"Listen, the basic rule of a politician's job is to quietly pass unpopular measures while the people are distracted."

"Some rules are made to be broken, right? Govern for the people!"

"Okay, all that stuff was, like, twenty percent joking. But this is still a really bad situation."

"So eighty percent was serious…"

In that case, it sounded like taxes were going up.

"Oh, whatever. We're not getting anywhere, so keep talking."

"Look, this is essentially a declaration of war! The Virginal Father will be attacking us in force! We're not up against rank and file this time. She's calling herself the head of the organization!" Ouka reeled, rumpling up her dress.

"I guess so… This isn't something we can afford to ignore…"

"There is no need to worry, Lady Ouka!" Sasara, clad in her knight's gear, stepped forward. "I will protect you no matter what happens. Even if this castle were to burn to the ground, even if the Empire were to fall, even if we were on the verge of losing everything, I will still protect you and

only you!”

“No, we can’t have the Empire fall! You need to protect the Empire!”

“Actually, once we’ve lost everything, you could start a new life with m __”

“Anyway, do your job. Dismissed.” It was too much for her, so Ouka cut the conversation short. “But we still need to prepare for the Virginal Father by getting our forces ready. Ah right, can I expect you to fight on behalf of the Empire, Rei?” She turned an expectant eye toward Ryouta’s sister. “I believe we could take down most enemies by using the power of your enraged spirits.”

Rei was haunted by enraged spirits—it was unclear if they were more like guardian angels or vengeful demons.

But when she was in battle, she could use their power to fight. Her enemies were tossed through the air by sudden attacks from invisible entities.

“I could take on the whole Virginal Father on my o— *Ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem! Cough! Bleugh!*” *…Thunk.*

“She’s already down!” Ryouta exclaimed. “It’s basically a running gag at this point, but she doesn’t disappoint!”

Though Rei’s spirits made her tenacious, she was exceedingly sickly and weak.

“Yeah, I don’t think she will be very reliable strength-wise… Which means, who else can we use…? Oh, that’s right!” Ouka whipped out her phone, as though inspiration had struck her. “Oh, hello, this is the emperor. Is this the Toraha household? Oh, Masatsuna! Good, this will go quickly.”

She had apparently called Sasara’s cousin, Masatsuna Toraha.

He was a swordsman skilled enough to be called the strongest in the Empire. Ryouta had fought him once and was sent straight to death’s doorstep.

“Whoa, hey! Lady Ouka! Why are you calling him?!” Sasara rushed toward Ouka in a panic.

The two cousins, at one point, were very close to getting engaged with each other. And it was very clear that Masatsuna was romantically interested in Sasara. He practically worshipped her.

“Actually, Masatsuna, there’s a chance the Virginal Father might be

attacking. When that happens, I want you to handle city's defenses~. And if we succeed, then I'll give you the right to kiss or do whatever you like to Sasara for an entire day~."

"Please wait! Please do not make dubious promises! I have heard nothing about this!"

"Huh~? You don't need such a generous reward? You are surprisingly pure of heart. But I guess you are a knight. A samurai. So sincere~."

"Well done, Masatsuna! As thanks, I'll gift you some cling wrap, or some paper towels!"

"Sasara, you should give your cousin something a little nicer. Those sound like freebies you got handed at a bank," Ryouta remarked.

"Indeed, I have some left over from when I made my fixed deposit at the Third Sacred Blood Imperial Bank."

"They really *are* freebies from a bank!"

Even though Masatsuna had come close to killing him before, Ryouta began to feel some sympathy for the guy.

Meanwhile, Ouka's phone call with him continued.

"Aww, come on, you're so quiet! Look, I'll even issue you a ticket that lets you kiss or do whatever you want to do with Sasara for a whole day, so you can just decide whether or not you want to use it, okay? Okaaay, bye~!" Ouka hung up after that bizarre promise.

"Lady Ouka… How awful of you… How could use take advantage of this chaos to offer such a thing…?"

"Is that so? We don't even know if he'll actually use it, so it's fine, right? And besides, you two should hurry up and get engaged. That would straighten out a lot of things."

"H-how could I…? It's unthinkable for someone as young as I am. And I must carefully consider my partner… Actually, Lady Ouka, shouldn't you be thinking about getting engaged to a prince from another country?"

"When did you get important enough to tell the emperor your opinions?"

A charged air filled the space between them.

Things between Ouka and Sasara have been kind of tense lately… They're not fighting, though…

"Ah, then we may as well end up together, Lady Ouka, because that will solve all our problems!"

"Hmm, I've been losing trust in your characterization as a lesbian…

Well, I don't necessarily mind, though…"

Just then, Shiren's phone rang.

"Oh, it's from Tamaki… I have an awful feeling about this…," she said.

"Same here… Shijou never calls to talk about positive things anyway…"

"Maybe I should pretend I never saw it…"

"No, you should probably answer it…"

Shiren reluctantly answered the phone.

"Ah, Shiren? I have to tell you that a lot of unfortunate things have been happening to me…"

"Right, I thought so. What kind of unfortunate things?"

"I thought I ordered ten jam rolls, but I got the number wrong…"

"Uh-huh, you added an extra zero and got one hundred? That's a mistake groceries and convenience stores make a lot."

"I thought I ordered ten, but I realized I accidentally ordered one hundred thousand of them. The store is swimming in jam rolls right now…"

"That's way too big of a mistake! At least keep it to one extra zero!"

"You know how they say misfortunes come in pairs? Well, I thought I ordered ten copies of Kairakuten *magazine, but I accidentally ordered one hundred thousand copies, and now customers can't even get into the store…"*

"Like I said, that's way too many zeroes to be an accident!"

"And now we have this new debt all of a sudden, and I believe our business is about to go under. Hee-hee-hee, hee-hee-hee…"

"You should really think about taking a different job. If you stay at the convenience store, things are gonna spiral out of control…"

"Oh my, I've just found the perfect rope…"

"Don't use it! Don't use it for anything, I'm telling you!"

"Well, things have been so unfortunate for me that I started to worry that it had spread to you, too, so I called…"

"To be honest, there *is* a really big problem over here. Though, I'm not sure if it's worse than a hundred thousand jam rolls…"

"It must be my fault. There's no other explanation. I'm sorry… I'll send you a ten-year supply of jam rolls as an apology."

"What do I need that for?! I'll just end up swimming in jam rolls, too!"

"Then how about ten thousand copies of Kairakuten*…?"*

“I don’t need ten thousand copies of the same magazine! You only need three: one to read, one to admire, and one for storage! Oh, but Ryouta might use them, so just give me five.”

“No thanks! Please don’t order things for me! And why five?!”

“With five, we don’t need to worry if one of them gets dirty—”

“Agh, just shut up! I don’t want any of them!”

“Well, I cannot have my misfortune infecting you, so I should hang up… Oh, the huge stack of Kairakuten *magazines is about to fall. I don’t know if I could sur*—kssssshk*,* kssssshk*,* kssssshk—*”*

What a horrible way to end a phone conversation.

“Hey, should we go help her? Getting crushed under a pile of porno mags sounds like the worst way to go…,” Ryouta said.

“I feel bad, but we’ll just have to trust that she’s okay… We’re facing a countrywide problem over here…,” Shiren said.

“Yeah, you’re right… I don’t think she’d actually die…”

“And Tamaki’s our class librarian. I’m pretty sure she’d love it if she got killed by books.”

“Definitely not! And I know she’s our class librarian, but that doesn’t mean she loves books *that* much!”

Tamaki had seemed pretty reluctant to take on the job, if he recalled correctly.

“Sorry, but we need to get back on topic. I don’t care if the convenience store has to close.” Ouka cleared her throat.

It was a rude thing to say, but she was right that this wasn’t the time to be thinking about the convenience store’s problems.

“We’ll make use of everything in our power. First—Matsuko Kimura.”

“Please, call me Alfoncina, Ouka! Don’t use my real name!”

The archbishop, one of the most important people in the Empire, was present for obvious reasons.

“Alfoncina, you will use your own connections to keep negotiations with Japan going.”

“Yes, I’ll check on my channels~. That way, we can tell if Japan is getting involved on the national level.”

“So you do have that kind of power…” Ryouta was impressed by the archbishop. She was no ordinary manga artist.

“Well, I did create a fan club back when I released my swimsuit photo

collection, and there were a few big-name politicians and bureaucrats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs among the fans. Some of my information comes through there~."

"That's not okay, Japan!"

"Even though we're now in the digital age, at the end of the day, information still leaks from the same places~. I'll have to send out an e-mail. I'll title it, *What did you think of the first episode of my anime,* YouRou IKou!?"

"Don't you think you should be asking something different?!"

"Look, they'll have their guard up if I suddenly cut to the chase. That's why I should at least start out by talking about anime or manga, since after that is when I ask for an extension on the next draft. That is basic etiquette."

"That's basic etiquette for when you e-mail your editor! This is a national catastrophe! A national catastrophe!! And does your anime audience overlap with your swimsuit audience?!"

"It's true, I did try to make everyone buy both by including lots of connected extras, but I knew it was going to give me a bad reputation, so I decided not to."

What a cheap sales strategy.

"Ah~, but Matsuko Kimura's connections are all genuine. The Kimura family has always been prominent, even back when they lived in Japan, so their network is quite useful," Ouka added.

"I told you not to use my real name!"

"You have to use everything in your power, Alfoncina. Work as hard as you can so that you do not embarrass Alfoncinas One through Twelve."

"Yes. In the name of Archbishop Alfoncina, I shall do what I can."

"Wow, that's quite a history… I had no idea the name *Alfoncina* alone had such a past behind it…"

Ryouta had been forced to memorize the names of all kinds of Roman popes in history class before, and he thought back on them now. They were always called So-and-so the Ninth or the Thirteenth.

"Ah~, all the archbishops of the past are detailed in the *Encyclopedia of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood*. If you look up *Alfoncina*, you'll find all of them."

Ouka pulled a book from the shelf beside her. It must have been an important document to be kept right there so handily.

Alfoncina 0: A legendary figure. Said to have been archbishop for centuries, but that is not possible, so she is a myth.

Alfoncina I: Was found to be engaging in embezzlement. Dismissed.

Alfoncina II: Was found to be committing adultery. Dismissed.

Alfoncina III: Often forgot ritual schedules and did not show up to important events throughout the year. Dismissed.

Alfoncina IV: Felt the work was harder than she had imagined. Quit after three days.

Alfoncina V: Declared the job was different from what she had anticipated. Quit after three months.

Alfoncina VI: Said she wanted to take over her parents' farm instead of being archbishop. Quit after six months.

Alfoncina VII: Was always late. Dismissed after three months.

Alfoncina VIII: Declared she was going back to being a "normal girl." Quit after eighteen months.

Alfoncina IX: Was discovered to be drinking and smoking despite being underage. Dismissed.

Alfoncina X: Quite capable and the greatest figure said to have taken on the Alfoncina name. However, an offer for a high position in another religion drew her away, and she quit after three years.

Alfoncina XI: Loved remote-controlled everything, so she remodeled the cathedral into a museum dedicated to remote-controlled vehicles. She was clearly not taking this seriously and was dismissed after eight months.

Alfoncina XII (the 1st): Failed the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood exam five times in a row; she clearly did not know anything about the church and was dismissed.

Alfoncina XII (the 2nd): Called herself XII, since some believed her predecessor should not be recognized after her failure at the exam. Two months after taking her post, it was discovered that she had cheated on her own exam, and she was dismissed.

Alfoncina XII (the 3rd): Called herself XII due to the above circumstances. Attempted to do away with the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood exam due to her lack of confidence in the test, but an opposition group removed her from office.

The Dark Ages: (No one successfully passed the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood exam, and the Sacred Blooded faced an unprecedented crisis, lacking an archbishop for thirty years. No one calling herself Alfoncina appeared.)

Alfoncina XII (the 4th): At last, one successfully passed the exam to become XII, but she was also accepted to the University of Tokyo and went there instead. She had reportedly taken the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood exam as a backup.

The name became associated with such bad luck that no archbishop calling herself Alfoncina came forth afterward. Casually taking up the post, XIII became the first Alfoncina in a long time.

"Not one of them actually served out their time!"

It was way worse than Ryouta had expected. It was a mess.

"That list really brings out how excellent our current Alfoncina is, doesn't it?" Ouka said.

"But why did she take on such a cursed name?!"

"Because the first one was a perfect, mythical superhuman. And all the other choices were super uncool. You wouldn't want to be called Henyonyo V, Pyoppyoro VII, or Ohyourossho III, would you?"

"Yeah, with those alternatives, I guess I do understand why she went with Alfoncina… What idiot came up with Henyonyo?"

"Anyway, you do your job, Alfoncina. If you fail, I'm going to call you Matsuko Kimura for the rest of your life. No, I'll call you Matsuko I."

"I will do my best, Ouka!"

Apparently, Alfoncina really hated her real name.

"That can't be the best way to motivate her…"

"Next, speaking of the Virginal Father makes me think of Kiyomizu. I have a lot I want to ask her," Ouka said.

She had been among their ranks, so it was likely she knew some detailed information.

"But it doesn't seem like she's around…"

"Now that you mention it, she wasn't at our house last night…"

Technically, it was weirder for her to be hanging around the Fuyukura household at all, but she always showed up whenever and wherever you least expected, so both Shiren and Ryouta were used to it by now.

"Wait, could she be the one who invited the Virginal Father here in the first place…?"

Ryouta was a bit sad that Ouka was casting doubt on Kiyomizu, but timing was everything; he could understand why.

“That can’t be, Big Sis,” Shiren immediately denied.

“How do you know?”

“She’s an oddball, but we can trust her on this. That is to say, I don’t think she’d double-cross us. And she’s had plenty of chances to attack me.” A unique bond of trust had formed between Shiren and Kiyomizu at some point. “And she’s not interested in the Sacred Blooded. She only thinks about Ryouta. Maybe she was educated to believe that we were once bad people, but I think she’s grown past that now.”

If they set aside her obsession with Ryouta, she was indeed just a good citizen of the Sacred Blood Empire.

“Shiren’s right. If she was actually plotting the downfall of the Empire, she would have gone after you by now, Ouka.”

“But she’s going after you, Ryouta.”

“Yeah, everyone but me is safe—and the fact I can’t deny that is kind of sad…”

“Indeed… You are right that it’s pointless to doubt her, so I’ll trust her on this one.” Ouka sighed and nodded. “What we can do right now is increase security. That’s about it. We can’t do much else without knowing when or with how large a force they’ll attack.”

Their only clue was Sairi’s letter. Not only was their information scant, but it was also unreliable.

It was hard to prepare on that alone.

“And so I’d like to make some things clear, as far as I can.” The air around Ouka shifted into something more intense and dignified as she said, “So, Shiren, I have some questions. Answer everything with complete honesty.”

“Of course. What is it, Big Sis?”

“You are certain you want to remain in the Empire, correct? You have absolutely no intention of going back to Japan with your mother?” Ouka was sounding more and more like an interrogator.

“O-obviously! Why would I ever leave the Empire? I can think of nothing more preposterous!”

“Is that so? Perhaps I’ve gotten the wrong idea here, but it seems as though you have some unfinished business with your mother.”

Ryouta swallowed. He had gotten the same sense.

“Who would want to meet a parent trying to waltz back into their life

after all this time?! I'm the victim here! I don't even want to see her face!"

"Great, if it's really that clear-cut for you. But see, love for family is special, and logic does not always count for much in these situations. I just wanted to ask to make sure."

Ouka was not speaking to Shiren as her older sister, but from her position as emperor. That's what it sounded like to Ryouta.

This was indeed bigger than a family problem—this was a national problem.

Even if Sairi came alone, she was not someone the Sacred Blood Empire could welcome as a guest.

"If I learn that Sairi Fuyukura has infiltrated the Empire, I will give the order for her arrest. We have no capital punishment here, but we will interrogate her as thoroughly as possible."

Ouka was doing her best to speak without emotion. There was nothing odd about any of this; the Empire could not allow the top suspect of the previous emperor's assassination to roam free.

This isn't easy to hear, but I bet it's even harder for her to say…

Even if a national problem was bigger, this was still a family problem.

Ryouta, the outsider, could do nothing but stand and watch things develop.

But then the outsider received a question.

"By the way, Ryouta, if Shiren does go with Sairi to Japan, do you plan on following her?"

"Why are you asking me this…?"

He had not been expecting anyone to ask him anything, so he was a bit taken aback.

Plus, it was an odd question. Shiren had just told them that she was not going anywhere.

"Look, you are her provisional minion, aren't you? I was just thinking you might go along with her."

"That would never happen. Shiren just said she wouldn't leave… And anyway, I can't go back to Japan the way I am. You know about my curse, Ouka."

Ryouta had been irresistible to girls, even way back in elementary school, causing him no shortage of distress.

Among his classmates, only Ouka, the Sacred Blooded, was able to see

him with clear eyes. She was the only one he could open up to.

And for that reason, she was his first love.

She was the sole person in his class, in the whole school, who treated him normally.

He never said anything about liking her at the time, though, and he hadn't said anything about it since, either.

"Understood. Then let me tell you a bit about what I think as your emperor." Ouka slowly stood from the throne. "Shiren, this is all conjecture, okay? You know I will never forgive Sairi Fuyukura, the prime suspect in our father's death. I'll be treating her like a traitor, an enemy of the state. You need to understand that, okay?"

"You just said that. Of course. It was probably Sairi's fault that Dad was killed, so…"

"But we haven't established real diplomatic ties with Japan yet, so if Sairi came to the Empire and then immediately left, there would be nothing we could do. I would not even request her extradition."

"What do you mean, Big Sis…?"

Shiren looked nervously at Ouka.

"What I mean to say is that I would not stop you if you left with Sairi and went to Japan. I wouldn't even cause you trouble by sending someone after you."

"I'm telling you, that's not even a possibility—"

"That may be true now, but I would not blame you if you wanted to live with your mother." Ouka cut Shiren off. "Those feelings are natural for anyone. And I promise you, I will not incriminate you for going to Japan. I acknowledge that is an important choice for you, as your emperor, and as your sister." There was a slight smile on her face. "No matter what kind of person Sairi Fuyukura is, she is still your mother."

Though her smile did not reach her eyes, Ryouta could tell that her words were coming from the heart.

"Okay. Thank you, Big Sis…"

There was the briefest hint of a smile on Shiren's face, too.

This was only goodwill coming from her older sister—or so Ryouta thought, until Ouka's face turned cold.

"If you do, however, then you'd best consider all your ties with the Empire completely cut."

“What…?”

“And your minion will not be going with you, either. A minion is a subject of the Empire. Though I may accept your own personal decisions, I will not allow you to involve other citizens. Ryouta has no intention of going back to Japan anyway.”

“So what are you trying to say…?”

“I’m practically spelling it out for you. I had hoped you would understand my meaning.” Ouka heaved a sigh, appalled. But there was a feverish hint to her sigh. “You will have to give up Ryouta when you leave with Sairi. He will no longer be your minion once you leave for Japan. That is all.”

The only reason Ryouta could remain as Ryouta Fuyukura, Shiren Fuyukura’s minion, was because Shiren was a member of the Empire.

There was no minion-master bond between them from the drinking of blood. Shiren hadn’t officially made him her minion yet.

Their relationship was only formally that of minion and master because the two of them acknowledged that it was.

If Shiren were to leave, then Ryouta Fuyukura would become a normal citizen of the Empire, Ryouta Asagiri.

“And when that happens…”

Ouka turned to look at Ryouta, embarrassed.

“…Ryouta, you will become my minion. The emperor’s minion.”

Ouka declared it so with solemnity, with the dignity befitting an emperor.

“What…? Ouka…?”

Ryouta, unable to fully understand what she was hinting at, faltered.

He wasn’t alone. Shiren was also frozen in shock.

After all, this was the first time since Ryouta came to the Empire that Ouka had stepped between them.

It had become routine for Ryouta and Shiren to spend all their time together. Neither of them had so much as imagined living any other way for a very long time.

But that wasn’t a fixed arrangement at all.

Ryouta was a unique presence within the Empire—he was neither Sacred Blooded nor a minion.

So unique, in fact, that his presence had political impact. How he was treated within the Empire was a concern that affected more than personal feelings. Whether he was given preferential treatment or discriminated against would directly impact the Empire's image within Japan.

That was why Ouka had told him to be her minion once before. She had determined that it would be the most beneficial choice.

At the time, he had insisted on staying with Shiren, who was still weak and in need of help. But even if he had avoided the order once, the issue had come back around. And now it had a different weight to it.

"Well, this is really sudden…"

He hadn't been emotionally prepared for this. After all, becoming Ouka's minion meant that he would have to live with her… And to him, she was his first love…

"What? It shouldn't cause any inconvenience. You are a member of the Imperial Guard. It is perfectly normal for you to stay by my side as my minion."

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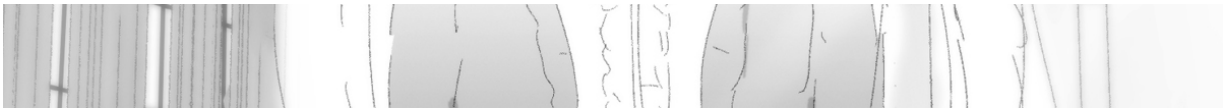

“I get that, but… You’d have to drink my blood and stuff, right…?”

“Did I not tell you this when we first met inside the Empire? You are one of the very few normal humans here. If we leave you as you are, then what if another Sacred Blooded attacked you and made you their minion? It would be a huge scandal for our country. And so I will take responsibility and make you my minion. You will find no better protection than this.”

“I mean, I get the logic, but…”

“I’ll just say this… And you better get it!” Ouka’s face flushed. “I’ll say it one more time. Be my minion, Ryouta… The emperor is speaking to you. You only have two answers: yes, or no!”

Her bright-red blush had reduced the majesty of her presence, but she was still in charge here.

The ruler of this country was the emperor, and the emperor’s words took precedence over everyone else’s.

“O-okay… But—”

Ryouta unwittingly turned to look at Shiren.

Her expression was anxious—as if she was seeing her future full of loneliness again.

“But that’s only *if* Shiren goes to Japan.”

Though Ouka’s speech had caught him off guard, if he really thought about it, this was just a hypothetical rule in the event of an exceptional situation.

And so it was unlikely to cause any problems. He would stay on as Shiren’s minion. All he had to do was say, *Okay*.

And seeing Ouka’s desperation made it nearly impossible for him to refuse.

Ouka was doing what she knew she had to. She wasn’t saying this on a whim.

“Lady Ouka, please wait! No matter the circumstances, don’t you think you’re being too forceful…?” Sasara spoke up, panicked. “Perhaps it is natural that the emperor’s sister’s minion would transfer over to the emperor, but right now, the Empire’s security is perfectly stable. I find it difficult to imagine that we will be suddenly attacked. And Ryouta Fuyukura is a member of the Imperial Guard, which means he should formally be treated the same as an Imperial noble. I don’t see any necessity for him to become your minion…”

“Precisely… I feel like the topic of minions has gotten way out of hand… If we are only talking about Ryouta’s safety, he could simply join the First Cathedral…” Alfoncina joined Sasara’s faction. “And we can consider this once his minion status has been reset, so I don’t think we need to decide on anything right now~. Hypothetical situations don’t need to be resolved so far in advance~.”

“You are correct. There is little need to consider this now. I am being selfish. I know this.” Ouka gave a determined smile—but that smile soon fell. “However, I’ve been keeping all those selfish thoughts to myself this whole time! For so long, I’ve tried so, so hard to keep it all in! Sasara, Alfoncina!” Ouka called out the two by name. “While you all are off having fun, I keep getting left further and further behind! Let me say what I want already! I’m not going to hold myself back just because I’m emperor! Both of you are being unfair! You cowards! Cowards! Cowards!” She lashed out at them, her expression furious.

Even her ears had gone bright red, like she considered them totally unforgivable.

“Ah, Lady Ouka… What do you mean by that…?”

“I—I wonder… Ah-ha-ha-ha…”

The other two looked uncomfortable—even guilty.

“You know what I mean! You know! And that makes you cowards! I’m through watching what I say! I’m the emperor, and I’ll act like a tyrant! If you have any complaints, get ready for a tax hike!”

Ouka sounded like a child throwing a tantrum.

It was a sight to behold; she rarely ever said anything like this.

“I’m the emperor, which means I can say and ask for whatever I want. But in practice, it’s always the opposite: If I can have everything I want, then I can’t just blurt out every thought and want I have. And that’s why I’ve been keeping it in this whoooooooole time!” She planted her hands on her hips and glared at everyone else present. “This whole time, Shiren, I’ve been lending you Ryouta. For your sake. But I don’t think you need him anymore. You’re not alone now, and you’re strong enough to make it on your own!”

“Big Sis, I…I, um…,” Shiren said weakly.

Indeed, the reason Ryouta had been living with Shiren was to look after her, considering how she didn’t have any friends at school and how lonely

she was. But there was no longer any need to worry about that.

"Anyway." Ouka inhaled deeply and continued, "The second you let go of him, he'll be my minion! End of discussion! No take-backsies! Whatever I say is set is stone!"

It seemed that, without him understanding much of what happened, a small slice of Ryouta's fate had been decided.

What's going to happen to me…? No, wait, I guess it doesn't matter if Shiren stays in the Empire…

But he was unable to hide his concerns.

And Shiren, too, looked pale.

"I-it'll be fine… I mean, that would never happen… It's all unthinkable, really… I can't imagine myself leaving the Empire in the first place…"

"Right. So it doesn't matter what kind of rules we make for if you do go, then." Ouka's childish, disapproving look settled on Shiren. It was even more intense than it had been thus far.

"Yeah… It won't be a problem…"

"Exactly, it won't be a problem."

At last, Ouka looked pleased with herself.

And then she went red again, and her expression turned back to one of embarrassment.

"But maybe I went a little overboard… Now I feel sorry… I almost regret it…," she said, somewhat awkwardly.

"W-well… But so long as Shiren Fuyukura remains in the country, Lady Ouka will never get her chance, so I doubt our situation will change that much… So you don't need to worry, Lady Ouka…"

"You're right~. I'll bet five hundred thousand sacred yen that things will stay exactly as they are now… Ha-ha-ha…"

Sasara and Alfoncina both spoke in turn, almost as though they were trying to calm themselves down.

Both of their eyes darted toward Ryouta, as though searching for something.

Ryouta, uneasy, looked away.

Now that he thought about it, he'd had incidents and close encounters with both Sasara and Alfoncina. Had he made a mistake, he might easily have become one of their minions. At the very least, the possibility was there.

“Hmph, say what you will. This lion isn’t going to sleep forever… I act when I need to… That’s all I wanted to get across. I won’t do anything rude.”

“I’m sorry you had to put so much thought into such a unique and unlikely situation, Big Sis, but I think that provision is probably unnecessary…”

“Anyone with an active vested interest isn’t allowed to speak.”

An odd tension settled between the sisters.

Why do I feel like I’m sitting on a bed of thorns…?

Ryouta recognized this feeling.

This is what it felt like in class, back when I was in Japan…

How strange.

The curse that made him irresistible to girls shouldn’t work on the Sacred Blooded…

Characters

Alfoncina XIII

The archbishop of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood who enjoys idol-like popularity throughout the Empire. She is a year above Ryouta and his classmates at school. Her real name is Matsuko Kimura.

Rei Asagiri

Ryouta's big sister. Her infatuation with her younger brother drove her to follow him to the Empire. She now works as a ninja for Ouka, the emperor.

Kokoko

The daughter of a god who had been enshrined in the Empire's mountains. She calls herself a fox, but she has rabbit ears. She works at Nine-to-Eleven, Tamaki's family's convenience store.

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EPISODE 2

LET'S CONFIRM WHERE OUR EMERGENCY EVACUATION LOCATIONS ARE!

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EPISODE 2

LET'S CONFIRM WHERE OUR EMERGENCY EVACUATION LOCATIONS ARE!

Ouka's selfishness had left everyone uncomfortable.

"U-uh, we shared all the info we have for now, so are we finished here…? I doubt the enemy's going to attack us right this moment, so…," Ryouta suggested awkwardly.

In all honesty, he wanted to go home.

Something was stressing him out, and the longer he stayed, the worse it got. He could feel every eye on him, and it was suffocating.

"You're honestly too soft, Ryouta. I may as well start calling you tomato soft serve, Ryouta," Shiren said.

"Don't bring up tomatoes in a situation like this."

"The Virginal Father and Sairi might be on their way. We have to have some discussion about countermeasures. Why do you think we came together like this?"

"But we have too little information. What is there to discuss?"

It was unclear when they would be coming, or how many people there would be. They didn't even know if this was part of a military operation by the Virginal Father, or just Sairi's personal visit to Shiren.

Not only that, but Japan also surrounded the Empire on all sides. There were countless potential invasion routes. And Ryouta was sure they didn't have the kind of armed forces needed to defend them from every point of potential attack.

"We can't go into detail, of course. But we can at least make sure we're prepared at all times. There are so many things we can't know until a real fire breaks out, but we can at least run fire drills, right?" Ouka said.

"Yeah, a drill sounds like a great idea. But where would we evacuate to…?"

"I will now inform you of the location of our national emergency

evacuation shelters. They are in unique places, so you and Shiren probably aren't familiar with them. It sounds like Sairi is after Shiren, so if something happens, Shiren can run there."

"Emergency evacuation shelters? This is the first I'm hearing about them. Well, I guess that's pretty standard." The Empire handled things so sloppily, Ryouta had never even thought about whether or not such facilities existed. "So it's like how we're told to evacuate to the school if there's an earthquake? Though, I'm pretty familiar with where the school is."

"The Fuyukura household is much closer to the castle. It's already on the castle grounds."

There was a garden in one part of the expansive castle grounds, and in one part of that garden stood the Fuyukura household. It was ostensibly within the bounds, but it wasn't fancy; if anything, it was run-down. And since the castle was luxurious, the comparison made the house look even worse.

Ouka pointed to the floor.

"What, is that sign language for *go to hell*?"

"No! I'm telling you there's a shelter deep underneath the castle."

"Oh yeah, last time you showed us around, you kind of glossed over the basement. It can't be much more than a storeroom or something, right?"

"Big Sis! Don't tell me there's a trick to it?! Like a hidden entrance behind a hanging scroll, or an old passage at the bottom of an unused well, like in ninja houses!"

Shiren suddenly grew excited. It sounded like she was hoping for ninja hiding spots.

"I'm sure they don't have anything that corny, Shiren," Ryouta said.

"There *is* a secret passage behind a wall scroll on the first floor. And it leads to the basement," Ouka said.

"Seriously?! You have one of those?!" Ryouta realized once again that it was *anything goes* in this country and its castle.

"But that passage only leads to the porno reading room."

"That's not an evacuation room!"

"It is if you want to evacuate from the harshness of reality."

"No! You need to stop escaping and focus on making your harsh reality something better!"

"*Pfft*, make this harsh reality better? Only a naive little high schooler

could say something like that.”

“You’re a high schooler, too! Don’t snort at me!”

Ryouta was having a hard time taking any of this seriously.

“Well, I figured a castle needs a touch of whimsy, so I made one.”

“You know, if you used the people’s tax money for that room, your approval rating is going to go down again…”

“It’s fine. No taxpayer money was used. Instead, I took a ten percent cut of all public officials’ salary for six months.”

“Your officials are going to be livid!”

This government was rotten to its core.

“Anyway. The emergency escape routes are somewhere else, of course.” Ouka had, at some point, taken a jangling ring full of keys in her hand. It was likely meant specifically for the emperor. “I thought I’d take you all there. This is the perfect time to do so.”

“Well, I guess we are all already here.”

“Come along. I’ll give you a glimpse into the abyss.”

“That’s a terrifying way of putting it…”

“But first, I’ll take you to the porno reading room.”

“No, thank you!”

“Membership is free at the moment, and it only costs twelve thousand sacred yen a year.”

“I’m not getting a membership!”

First, they took the elevator down to the second basement level.

“This is the storage floor, right, Big Sis?”

Shiren, of course, did seem to know a bit about the castle. And it was indeed crammed with everything from medicine chests and emergency provisions to toilet paper and printer toner.

“Yes. The second basement level is, at least.”

“There sure is a lot, but I guess this is all for the castle…,” Ryouta remarked.

Various items were stacked up to the ceiling. The scale of it all was closer to a corporation than a household.

“Here we have A4-size paper. B5 is back there, A3 is over there, and we keep the colored paper away from the rest, but—”

“I don’t need to know about the paper!”

“This small box here is full of the toner we use the most. That huge one back there has toner for very special printers, so there aren’t very many of them. And over there, we have drum cartridges—”

“I don’t need to know about your printer supplies, either!”

“Over there, we have whiteboards and cones for special events, but we don’t really use those anymore. And that box has our event equipment set. Inside we keep utility knives, scissors, masking tape, rope, tools, pocket radios, and all other kinds of things.”

“Seriously, don’t bother running through everything in the storeroom! And why do you know what’s in all these boxes? Aren’t you the emperor?!”

Wasn’t that a task for her vassals? Ryouta honestly doubted that there was another emperor who knew where their printer toner was kept.

“This castle is like my house, so I like to know where everything is.”

“I see. So this is like working from home…”

“Hey, Big Sis? Can I have a roll of packing tape from over there?”

“No. Everything in here was all purchased with taxpayer money.”

“Big Sis, did you just say something responsible?!”

The way Shiren expressed her shock to her big sister was a bit rude.

“This feels pretty relaxed for an evacuation drill…,” Ryouta said. “And this is just a regular storeroom.”

“But there *is* a trick to it.”

Ouka stopped to stand in the middle of the corridor. She tapped lightly on the wall, and the echo from the other side indicated that it was hollow.

“There’s a hidden room on the other side of this wall.”

“I see, so this is where you have the evacuation room.”

Ryouta didn’t see an entrance, so it was unlikely a passerby would notice it.

“No. That’s the porno reading room.”

“I keep telling you, that’s irrelevant!”

“I’d say its one shortcoming is that the walls are thin, so any loud noise leaks into the hallway.”

“Then it’s not really working as a hidden room, is it?!”

“But we left them thin because there are some people who get really excited—you know—about the thought that someone might hear them.”

“I don’t want to hear about people’s fetishes!”

“We need to be a government that considers the needs of all minorities.”

“Don’t try to make it sound noble!”

“Anyway, let’s keep going.”

At the very end of the storeroom was a small push door. The symbol on it indicated that this was the girls’ bathroom.

“Go on, Ryouta. Open it.”

“Why do I have to open it?! Shouldn’t a girl open this kind of door?!”

“You know I’m here, too, Big Sis…”

“It’s not very interesting if you open it, Shiren.”

Ryouta had apparently been chosen for the amusement factor.

The sense of crisis here was truly below zero.

“No need to worry, no one’s inside. Come now, open it. Your emperor commands you.”

“Well, I guess it’s okay if no one’s in there… I feel like a criminal, though…”

When they stepped in, they found the usual three toilet stalls. The one at the far end was closed. It was a typical bathroom.

“Huh, something feels off about this place…”

“Isn’t that because you’re a boy, and you’re not supposed to be here in the girls’ bathroom?”

“…No, it’s not that. Something’s different… Oh!” There were keyholes on the stall doors. “These stalls can be opened with a key from the outside.”

“Correct. Now, Ryouta, open the one at the back.”

“No one’s in there, right…?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. You can knock if you like.”

“This is another command from the emperor, isn’t it…? Fine.”

With no other choice, Ryouta knocked on the stall door.

“OCCUPIED.”

“Why does the reply sound like text-to-speech…?”

“It’s an automatic voice system. Great camouflage, right? Now use the key to open it.”

Ryouta opened the door to find not a toilet, but stairs leading down.

“I see… You built a hidden stairwell in the girls’ bathroom… It’s clever,

in a way…”

He glanced over at Ouka, and she looked rather proud of herself.

“To be honest, man-made disasters trump natural disasters—an enemy attack seemed much scarier to me. That’s why I made the entrance so hard to find.”

“When I left the castle, this place was still under construction. I see it’s come a long way.” Shiren was impressed by the handiwork, too.

“But the reply after the knock is so unnatural, it’s not actually that well camouflaged…”

“The national R&D team is working on that now. But it does have a range of replies. It’d be much more suspicious if it said the same thing every time.”

“I have a feeling there’s a problem with the voice itself, but I get what you’re trying to say.”

“Give it another knock, then.”

Ryouta knocked on the door again. *Knock, knock.*

“The next stop is Hara Sanchome. Please get off here for the Yoshida Clinic for Internal Medicine.”

“Don’t give it a bus-stop announcement! That’s even weirder!”

“We went for quantity, so there’s all sorts of them. A few may be a bit weird, of course.”

“Stop requested. Please remain seated until the bus reaches a full stop.”

“You included someone requesting a stop?!”

“It’s creating a sense of reality.”

“I don’t need such a wide range of experiences *in the bathroom*!”

Ryouta knocked again, just in case.

“Welcome to our automated teller machine. Please touch the screen to begin.”

“A bank ATM?! People’d know this is fake immediately!”

“Weird… I thought we had better ones…”

Ouka knocked, too.

“~~♪~~ Thank you for shopping with us. We will be closing at nine PM. We hope to see you again soon.” (store closing music)

“Why is there a store closing announcement?! Did no one take this seriously?! I’ll raise taxes! I’ll lower their wages!”

“You’re our guide, and you’re upset?! This is hopeless!”

“Oh, whatever! I’m going on ahead! I’ll fix the automated voices later! I’ll dock the R&D team’s salary!”

They proceeded down the stairs and exited into what would be the third basement corridor.

It was rather spacious—about five meters wide.

But that went almost unnoticed because of how long the corridor itself was. It never seemed to end.

“I see… It’s made so everyone can fit, in case of an emergency…”

“But the evacuation site is farther ahead. Pretend you’re in an Indiana J*nes movie.”

“You didn’t put any giant boulders or traps in here, right…?”

“Our budget wouldn’t allow it.”

“So they *were* in your original plan…”

“It was hard to give up the lava lake, too, but we simply couldn’t afford it.”

“Good thing, too. The maintenance alone would be a disaster.”

“And it would’ve been marvelous if we’d been able to install an infinite loop feature, but that’s apparently not possible with modern science.”

“If you could make something like that, you wouldn’t need an evacuation shelter!”

“Oh, look, Ryouta. There’s a good idea.” Shiren pointed to a soft drink vending machine. “And everything’s a hundred yen, even the big drinks! It’d be a dream to stumble across one of these in the summer!”

“It’s a long journey, so I put it here in hopes that people would get thirsty and buy something,” Ouka said. “If it goes well, then it could lead to

an increase in revenue.”

“No way, the electricity cost will definitely outweigh any profit!” Ryouta exclaimed. “And if the vending-machine technician has to come all the way in here, it isn’t much of a secret passage, is it?”

“……You’re right.”

“You didn’t realize that before?!”

“I was so concentrated on grabbing people’s tax money that I lost sight of what’s important.”

“You can’t say ‘grab’ like that when you’re a policymaker!”

“The people of this era want a politician who’s honest, not someone who hides the truth.”

“Your ‘truth’ is way too much; you can keep it!”

They proceeded another several hundred meters down the corridor and found another oddity.

“Big Sis, why is this here…?”

In front of them was a ticket machine and an automatic turnstile.

And past the turnstile was another stairwell leading down.

“Here, you have to buy a ticket in order to keep going. This will definitely stop people.”

Ryouta looked at the ticket machine.

Basement 4 East	¥320 sacred yen
Basement 4 Central	¥450 sacred yen
1 Day Free Pass	¥800 sacred yen

“Your base fare is pretty steep!”

“It took a lot of money to dig out this basement, so it’ll be high until we can recoup some of the cost. And Basement Four refers to the floor below us.”

“What is this, a train line to a new residential area…? And I don’t get what the free pass is for.”

“It’s the best value for your money if you have to come and go for work.”

“When did you build a subway anyway…?”

No matter how he thought about it, that wasn’t something you could

build in secret.

"We haven't bought any train cars yet, so we still have to walk to the station. We'll be walking along the underground."

"Then this is like a checkpoint system…?"

Ryouta was shocked; he had no idea they'd be asking for money in a place like this.

"Oh, we'll be going and then coming back, so you should get a free pass."

"What…? You want us to pay?"

"Obviously. I stick to my principles. All subjects are taxed evenly. I'm aiming for a clean government."

"I get the feeling the core is still pretty dirty."

Ryouta wished that she would install a president or something in addition to the emperor.

"By the way, what's the difference between Basement Four East and Basement Four Central?"

"You can get up to the third basement from Basement Four East. But if you do that, keep in mind you will have to beat some famous retro games like *Iraira Bō* and *Struck Out* in order to proceed. That's why it's best to just buy a ticket to Basement Four Central."

"Sorry… I think those games are a little before my generation. I've never heard of them…"

"You also need to beat *Wagan Land*."

"Okay, I can tell this is related to a personal hobby… I'm totally lost… But I guess that means that there are traps ahead if we try to keep going along the third floor, right?"

"Yes."

"… You could've just had the third basement level on its own to begin with…"

"If the creator doesn't think something is interesting, others won't enjoy it."

"You really don't need to get creative about things like this."

"Oh, Ryouta," Shiren spoke up. "I didn't bring my wallet, so you'll have to buy my ticket for me."

"Okay, okay… I didn't think I'd be spending money down here… By the way, don't you have to get a ticket, Ouka?"

“I have this.”

Ouka produced a strange ticket that read, *Complimentary Ticket for Stockholder*.

“Are you sure *stockholder* is the right word for…? Oh, never mind. I’m tired of this…”

Afterward, Ryouta bought the one-day free passes, and they all went down to the fourth sublevel, then came back up to the third floor from a staircase labeled BASEMENT 4 CENTRAL EXIT.

After walking for another ten minutes, they came to a sturdy-looking door.

“It looks solid, at least… Like a vault door in a bank…”

“I believe it’s even stronger than the one in your average bank,” Ouka said.

It looked like it was kept shut with a keylock; they would need to enter a number code to get in.

“The emergency shelter is just behind here. I doubt anyone could make it this far.”

“Yeah. Even if they did, they still wouldn’t be able to get through without the code. This is finally starting to feel covert. But wouldn’t it be bad if you needed to get in but couldn’t because you didn’t know the code?” Ryouta asked.

Or maybe it was meant to be a place only her attendants and other special individuals could hide in.

“Oh, that’s not a problem.” Ouka pressed some buttons.

1—1—1—1— *Beeeeep*, *click*.

“It’s open. Go on in.”

“Wait, shouldn’t your password be a little more complex?! 1111 is the worst one you could pick…”

“Oh, it’s fine. Our goal today is just to confirm where our evacuation shelter is. And it’s here.”

“Oh god, Big Sis, what is this room…?”

Shiren brought a hand to her mouth.

Before them was a room decked out in horrific decorations, like a black-

magic altar.

The walls of the room were covered with curtains that were embroidered with skulls and bats, and red roses were scattered across the floor.

A statue of the Goddess of Blood sat in a recessed wall shrine.

And in the center stood a massive wooden coffin.

It appeared to have been plucked right out of a haunted house.

"W-wait, Big Sis… I'm scared… I don't like scary stuff…"

"And what will being scared accomplish for you? This is our emergency shelter. Even for the Virginal Father, it will not be easy to make it this far. If worse comes to worst, then come here and hide."

"I know that, but why is there a coffin in the middle…? I keep thinking there's someone inside…"

Ryouta's gaze was, naturally, fixed on the coffin.

"Oh, of course there is. And it's someone you know well, Shiren."

"What…?"

Without a moment of hesitation, Ouka knocked on the coffin lid.

"It's time to wake up. I brought guests."

"Ooh, I am so sleepy… Allow me another fifty hours' rest…" A voice came from inside the coffin with an unbelievable request.

"That is too much sleep. Come now, wake up."

"Then allow me another forty-nine hours and sixty-five minutes' sleep…"

"You are not a child on summer vacation! And you've increased your time by another five minutes!"

"No, no, no! There is no joy in this world but in sleeping. I shall slumber twenty-five hours a day!"

Ryouta guessed the voice belonged to a woman, but he couldn't be totally sure without seeing the speaker.

"Hey, Ouka? Who on Earth would be in there? Whoever it is, they sound pretty useless…"

"I'll introduce you once she comes out. The problem is that she rarely does… This emergency shelter is her private room. She likes dark, quiet spaces."

"Apologies, but this interior design is kind of terrible…"

"Ryouta, I think I know who it is… There can only be one person this useless…" Shiren's face clouded over.

“Do you not get along? Well, they do seem kind of cringe, so maybe that’s unavoidable…”

Meanwhile, Ouka was still trying to coax out the coffin’s occupant.

“Wa-ha-ha, no one can interrupt my restful sleep! This coffin has been specially made! Not even an elephant can break it open! But I would certainly be nervous should an elephant indeed step onto it… Well, no elephant could possibly reach this place. Bwa-ha-ha-ha!”

“Come on! Come out already! This isn’t funny!”

“Aaah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Feel my pain! Feel the pain of never making it to the final boss, and thus never beating a game! I was never able to beat DQ3… Perhaps I used an item in the wrong place… A bridge that was supposed to reach the fiend’s castle was not there…”

“I don’t give a crap about your nostalgia!”

“In DQ1, I got my Spell of Restoration password wrong and almost cried, and in DQ4, my adventure log disappeared, and I almost cried. I cursed the goddess. I thought about taking up the mantle of Dragonlord myself and obliterating the world.”

“We don’t need to hear any of this! Get out here!”

“When I picked Nera over Bianca in DQ5, my friend criticized my very personality, saying I was a failure of a human and that I’m always blinded by the shine of money.”

Ryouta wasn’t sure who this was, but it was clear they liked games.

“Ugh, now I have to use her name, don’t I…?” It sounded like Ouka had given up on conventional methods. “Mother! Sairi might be coming!”

Wham!

The sealed lid on the coffin flew open.

The person who emerged was an adult woman, her face very similar to Ouka’s.

But unlike Ouka, she wore a jet-black dress, exactly like a stereotypical vampire. And her neck was layered with accessories, giving her those final-boss vibes.

“What do you mean, Sairi is coming? Had she not escaped to the distant land of Arcadia?”

“She may be coming back, Mother. I will now inform you of the details.”

Ouka looked awkward and uncomfortable, which was unusual. It was

probably a question of status.

"You keep calling her 'Mother,' Ouka… Does that mean…?"

"Yes. This is my mother; she's the empress dowager—"

"Humble yourself, girl! Stand down! Stand down! Stand down! I am Empress Dowager Ominaeshi Elisabeta Alexandra Florentina Sylvia Rosanna Victoria Sarano!" The empress dowager proudly stated her name.

"Mother, please don't lengthen your name without letting me know. Your name is Ominaeshi Elisabeta Alexandra Florentina Sylvia Rosanna Sarano. There's no Victoria!"

"I thought I would add it to express that I have been reborn. I am a new me."

"You don't need it! And if you want to be a new you, then you can start with going outside for once!"

The royals had very long full names, and it had been a while since Ryouta had heard one unabbreviated. Even the emperor herself typically went by Ouka Sarano.

That's right, Ouka isn't Sairi's daughter, and I'd never heard of the emperor's legal wife being killed, so I guess it's a given that she's still alive… And yet I'd never seen her around. Turns out she was here the whole time…

A lot of things started making sense to Ryouta.

"Mm, Shiren. Sairi's daughter. You've grown considerably. You are starting to look like her, though I hope that the resemblance remains only skin-deep."

"I-it is lovely to see you, Lady Ominaeshi…," Shiren greeted respectfully.

This person was her stepmother, so she probably felt a little awkward.

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“Ouka tells me you are doing quite well for yourself. And who is this boy? He looks impoverished.”

“I-impoverished…?”

The remark stung a bit.

“Mother, this is Ryouta…”

“Ah, the one you have crush o— *Mmf!*”

Ouka reflexively covered Ominaeshi’s mouth with her hand. “My, Mother, you still seem to be groggy from all that sleep. Why don’t I tuck you in again? Forever?”

“Mrrrf, mrrrf! Hmmmmf!”

She was ruthless toward her own mother.

“Before, you said seeing him again after so many years made you think it was fate— *Mmf!*”

“It seems you know too much, Mother. Good-bye. In the definite sense.”

“F-fine… Child of mine, I shall try to speak more appropriately… Or rather, it seems I will be killed if I don’t… I only said I wanted to sleep for fifty hours, not forever…”

“Indeed, because no one will notice if anything happens in a hidden room all the way down here, Mother. I hope you realize that.”

“Hmph… I am not so weak that I could be done in by a little girl.”

“I cannot imagine how you can be so haughty, considering you can’t even finish an RPG.”

“You are not allowed to say that word in here. Ahh…I just had a flashback to the music that played when my adventure log got deleted…”

What an unpleasant mother-daughter relationship.

“By the way, may I ask why you are down here, Ms. Ominaeshi?” Ryouta asked a simple question. There were a lot of things nagging at him, so he decided to start with the biggest one.

“Heh… Heh-heh… Do you want to know? Knowing the truth may destroy your sanity. Are you ready? Heh-heh… I don’t like to be in the sun.”

Her reason was pretty mundane after all that buildup.

“Ah, yeah, I know the type. Some people just can’t stand being out in the sun for very long.”

“That is not quite it… If I stay in the sun, then I’ll start producing v-vitamin D…”

“That’s good for you! And it’s just a normal body function!”

“Oh, Ryouta, don’t take her seriously. She just likes the idea that being in the sun will kill her. She enjoys it. She’s just an edgy teen in her Mary Sue phase. Despite being in her thirties.”

“Ouka, that word is off-limits, too. I am forever seventeen.”

“Uh-huh, is that so? Then I will no longer be able to bring you any sweet-potato or soba *shochu*. You shouldn’t drink before turning twenty, you know~.”

“Wait! Time-out, time-out, I just turned twenty, right this instant! I can drink! I can drink my sweet-potato *shochu*!” Ominaeshi desperately argued. It sounded like she was very fond of alcohol.

“Now that you mention it, there are a lot of bottles in the corner…”

Ryouta could see bottle-collection crates filled to the brim with empties.

“Heh… How am I supposed to create the mood in here if I am not drinking bloodred wine?”

“They all look like sweet-potato *shochu* bottles…”

All strangeness aside, Ryouta had understood that this was a woman who was totally lost in her own fantasy world and, as a result, very difficult to handle.

“So you said Sairi is coming, hmm? What do you mean by that? It is not as though her sins have been forgiven.”

“Ah yes, about that. You see…” Ouka explained the situation briefly.

“Mm-hmm. So she is traveling to the Empire from the far-off land of El Dorado in order to take back her daughter. I see.” Ominaeshi nodded, satisfied.

“Hey, Ouka? She keeps saying things like Arcadia and El Dorado. What does that mean?”

“Japan. My mother needs to refer to Japan as dumb fantasy names in order to satisfy herself. And unfortunately, she’s not even good at it. Nothing sticks.”

Ryouta now felt doubly sure. This woman was a lot of trouble to deal with.

“El Dorado aside, that is exactly what is happening.”

“I see, I see. So she will finally be coming to us from the distant realm of Wikipedia.”

“Mother, Wikipedia is not a geographic location,” Ouka said flatly.

“And we were thinking, should that happen, this would be a good place to hide.”

“Indeed. The sun will never shine down here.”

“Mother, the Sacred Blooded can’t be killed by the sun, you know.”

“You still know not of the terrible power the sun has, Ouka. The sun follows you wherever you go in *Super Ma*io 3*.”

“I don’t care about retro games.”

It seemed like the games installed under the castle were due to Ominaeshi’s interests and not Ouka’s.

“And isn’t it painful to sleep in such a hard coffin?”

“…It actually is, yes.”

Apparently, she wasn’t staying down here because it was comfortable, but because it was part of the character image she wanted to project.

“I could get you a soft, comfortable bed right away if you wanted one. We have money in the Imperial household budget.”

“It is tempting, but I feel as though I should not compromise on such things…” She genuinely looked conflicted.

“Big Sis, I had no idea we had a budget for the Imperial household. How wonderful! In that case, I need a soft bed for my house!”

“Sorry, Shiren, but you weren’t technically a part of the royal family at the beginning of the fiscal year. Try again next year.”

Shiren tried to slip in a little suggestion to up her own quality of life, but it didn’t work.

“I’ll buy you one if you get over eighty percent on a test.”

“You know I could never get that! This is tyranny!”

“Your ambitions are so low, Shiren…,” Ryouta said.

It was a pretty realistic number, and he wished she would at least give it a try.

“And we’re getting off track. What were we talking about again…?”

“Ah, right.” Ouka cleared her throat. “Mother, if the enemy is to attack, I am hoping to have Shiren hide here… Is that all right?”

There was something off about the way she was speaking.

It sounded less like she was trying to get permission from the room’s occupant, and more like she was seeking confirmation on some more significant matter.

“I care not. The only ones I hate are Sairi and Ouen. Though she may be

their child, I am not a fool who would hold her birth against her. In fact, I'd say"—Ominaeshi turned to look at Shiren with rounded eyes—"the most important thing is what the child herself thinks."

Shiren's shoulders shuddered.

That's right, Shiren's mother is probably one who killed Ms. Ominaeshi's husband…

This was not a simple relationship between stepmother and child.

It was more complicated than that. More blood-soaked.

And come to think of it, didn't she just say that she hated Ouen, too?

If memory served him correctly, then Ouen Sarano was the previous emperor—Ouka and Shiren's father, the one Sairi was said to have killed.

This was, indeed, a complicated and bizarre relationship. One that an outsider should take care to keep out of.

"If you don't want to see Sairi, then I will lend you all the help I can give. After all, she is number two on my list of most hated people in the world. Nothing gives me more satisfaction than causing her trouble. Oh-ho-ho!"

Ominaeshi laughed with delight. Even though she was supposed to be Ouka's parent, she was rather young. Her "forever seventeen" bit may be just a joke, but Ryouta began to wonder if living down here had some kind of antiaging effect.

"Um… Lady Ominaeshi… I want to stay here with everyone else, not my mother. Please…" Shiren bowed her head.

"Mm, very well. You may hide here. Oh-ho-ho… Sairi, I will cause you the greatest annoyance your life has ever seen… You shan't lay a finger on me; I shall stun-lock you mercilessly in the fighting game of life…"

She had the air of a villainess, partially thanks to her looks, but it seemed like they could rely on her.

"She was always so abnormally good at puzzle games… She could pull off ten-plus combos with ease… And she was quite good at *Smash Br*s.*, too… But I am not the same as I was then…"

It kind of sounded like they were gaming buddies, actually.

Maybe things will work out with this. I doubt the enemy will have an easy time getting down here anyway.

Ryouta felt a bit more at ease, too.

"And if we do find ourselves in an emergency, I'll station an Imperial

guard outside this room. Ryouta, if that happens, I want you to join the fight. All right?"

"Of course. I'm still an Imperial guard, after all."

Though it hadn't been very long, he was cognizant of his position as a member of the Guard.

He didn't spend much time on duty with the other members, but he considered protecting Shiren, the emperor's little sister, as an equivalent mission. And that was how he had been spending his days.

"But I don't know if I'll be a lot of help, power-wise…"

"It's all right. So long as you stick around, Sasara's power grows by about threefold."

"Huh, why…?"

He didn't really understand why Sasara's name had come up here.

"I'm the emperor. I know my vassals well." Despite what she said, Ouka seemed rather displeased. "If only I hadn't taken up the emperor's mantle. I'm so jealous of her."

"Huh? Do you mean because Sasara has more freedom and seems to have more fun?"

"That's not for you to know, Ryouta." Ouka brought back her majestic smile. "Attack whenever you want, Virginal Father. I will be the one to claim total victory in the end."

"There's nothing to fear in the whole world when you have that look, Ouka. Oh-ho-ho." Ominaeshi chuckled, undaunted. "The only thing I fear is how the *katsuo* flakes dance on top of steaming-hot *takoyaki*."

"That scares you?! I've only heard of that scaring nursery school kids!"

"Oh, is it not shocking to you…? Do you not lose your appetite when you see a strange creature atop your *takoyaki*?"

"No, I think normal people are fine with it…" At the very least, Ryouta was.

"Do you mean to tell me that I am not a normal person?!"

"Aren't you trying to *show* us that you're not a normal person?!"

"My mother is unique. She is impossible to measure by any normal means."

Ouka chimed in to support (?) her mother.

"Indeed, indeed. I am proud of you, child. You know me well."

"Yes, I've been your daughter for over a decade now, so I know exactly

how to handle you."

There was absolutely no respect in her voice.

"Well, Sairi may come if she pleases. There is no safer place within the Empire than this spot. No need to be a stranger, Shiren. Oh-ho-ho." Ominaeshi turned to Shiren and smiled again.

You know, I think she's a good person deep down.

As weird as she was, it seemed like he could entrust Shiren to her when it counted.

"I won't! Thank you so much, Lady Ominaeshi!"

"Of course, darling. After all, you and I have an enemy in common."

Even though their positions were different, their goals were the same.

"Though…who knows how long that will last?"

"What…?"

"There is no need to settle everything right at this instant. You will get another chance to choose how you will face Sairi when she appears. The time will come. Oh-ho-ho…" Ominaeshi laughed; it was hard to tell how much was just her overacting. "Oh-ho-ho, oh-ho-ho… Now, I am tired, so I shall sleep," she said, getting back into her coffin and shutting the lid.

All in all, it was almost comical.

"Well, it seems like Mother is back to bed. It's time we return, too."

Ouka turned to leave the room; her job here was done.

"R-right… There's nothing else left to do in here…" Shiren followed her.

But unease was creeping across her face, probably because of what Ominaeshi had said.

"H-hey, Shiren—"

"Why would I change my mind?" she said quietly to herself. "I hate her. I hate her…"

She had missed what he said, and now it felt like he was eavesdropping on her.

"Oh, Ryouta. Did you say something?"

"Oh, no, nothing."

Still worrying, he followed the other two.

"Let's go, Ryouta," Shiren said.

There was no emergency, so they had no reason to stay.

Castle Floor Guide

Here's a quick rundown of the basement levels.

Basement 1: Multipurpose hall
Basement 2: Storage 1 (A4 printer paper, A3 printer paper, B4 printer paper, B5 printer paper, colored paper), Storage 2 (toner bottles for newer-model copy machines, toner bottles for older copy machines, printer toner, drum cartridges, rotary toner, rotary colored inks), Storage 3 (high-visibility rope, colored cones, end-of-line cards, midline cards, radios, masking tape, packing tape, clear tape, permanent markers, staff armbands), porno reading room
Basement 3: Passageway (free) but with traps
Basement 4: Passageway (paid)

You go into way too much detail for Basement Two! And Storage Three is obviously for convention staff!

Basement One is ready to hold the conventions as well. We can fit up to fifteen hundred tables.

Why are you so prepared for that?!

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EPISODE 3

LET'S LOOK INTO THE ENEMY'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS!

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EPISODE 3

LET'S LOOK INTO THE ENEMY'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS!

Around the same time, Kiyomizu Jouryuuji was leaving the Empire to return to Japan.

Good grief, what is going on? Suddenly losing contact with the order like this is a little eerie.

The regular communications she had been receiving had come to an abrupt stop, so she was going to check on things.

Borders were, of course, a trivial matter.

The national border was essentially meaningless to Kiyomizu. Even if a border guard did discover her, she could just take them out. Anyone with a backbone in this country became an Imperial guard or was stationed somewhere in the interior. There was no one who could stop her here.

Kiyomizu Jouryuuji was the heir to the family that controlled the order of the Virginal Father, and she was considered the strongest among all their active members.

After many changes and transitions, the current order fell entirely under the control of the Jouryuuji clan.

The Jouryuujis were split into several branch families—Hijirigawa, Gomain, and Akaike—who, together with the head family, controlled the inner workings of the order throughout the country.

Every one of them had a specialized power that worked against the Sacred Blooded. There were even some who said that the Jouryuuji family had become abominations themselves in the process.

Though at times their relations were strained, a multilayered communications network had kept the family together.

Despite that, Kiyomizu had suddenly been left in the dark.

I hope it's nothing… But there is a chance my foolish father really messed up…

She raced along, faster than a beast, and exited into the mountains of

Oshiro in Japan.

There was no need for her to go into town. The gentle mountain ridges that separated the Empire and Oshiro went on at length in both directions.

In the middle of said mountain range lay Kiyomizu's destination.

As she made her way along the faint path, she came across a cave opening.

The small statue of the Kannon bodhisattva hinted at the presence of people. Most of it had eroded away at this point, but it was a testament to the style of stonework that had flourished in the Kamakura period.

And despite its weathered state, people still came to this place.

This was the Jouryuuji training dojo and hideout.

If anything happened, they were to gather in this cave—their grotto of meditation. There would be no point, after all, if she had gone straight to their base at Jouryuuji Temple only to find it had already fallen to the enemy.

Though the entrance to the cave was tight, after crouching for a short stretch, Kiyomizu emerged into a spacious area.

Inside was the Jouryuuji family.

Tatami covered the floor, the lights were on, and Kiyomizu even saw some people using the Internet; there must have been Wi-Fi set up in here. Some of them were even chatting over tea and cake. Some were reading manga.

There were about fifteen in total, spanning all ages with a roughly even gender divide—including some whose gender was unclear. Some wore the stoles of Buddhist priests, and some the garb of mountain ascetics.

To put it simply, it was how the Jouryuuji family had always been.

"What are you all doing here?" Kiyomizu asked her father, Rakan Jouryuuji, who was sitting hunched over and watching TV. There was an air of indignity about him.

His head was shaved, typical for a Buddhist priest, but as if to make up for it, he sported a massive beard.

"Ah, Kiyomizu, you're back from the Empire… I've been waiting for you."

"Oh really? Waiting for me without sending any word? And what happened? You're all in evacuation mode."

"To tell you the truth, there's been a problem with the Virginal Father

headquarters…”

“I can tell, since you are all here in the cave. What happened? I can’t imagine an outside enemy would be able to seriously damage the order.”

“…You won’t get mad if I tell you, will you?”

“I might, depending on the situation. You may be my father, but I will still partially kill you. Not all the way, just partially.”

“…You won’t get mad if I tell you, will you?”

“You will be in for an even worse time if you do *not* tell me. I will even lay waste to your gravestone!”

“…You won’t get mad if I tell you, will you?”

“Oh, fine! I won’t, just tell it to me already! What happened while I was away?”

“The branch manager of the Virginal Father’s Tokai Bloc, Sairi Fuyukura, executed a coup d’état and essentially destroyed the order; now only a few people remain in her direct service… She even took over the Jouryuuji Temple itself…”

“Sairi Fuyukura? She was the Sacred Blooded Emperor’s lover… She knew he was Sacred Blooded and still had a child with him. Unbelievable…”

Someone who believed in the Virginal Father’s ideology would also hate the Sacred Blooded. And so even if it was part of some scheme, it was unthinkable to bear a Sacred Blooded child.

“If I recall correctly, the order was treating her as a heretic for that very reason… That should’ve been fine, but it sounds like the heretic treatment gave her the perfect opportunity to rebel…”

“Indeed… We believed that she had assassinated the Sacred Blooded Emperor and prepared a branch post for her, but that turned out to be a mistake… Considering it now, it does sound ridiculous that she would live with the Sacred Blooded Emperor for over a decade simply as part of a scheme… She had us completely fooled…”

It was extremely rare that someone who was not a part of the Jouryuuji clan was given an important post; after all, it was the Jouryuujis’ financial power that had brought the Virginal Father into being.

But conversely, that meant that Sairi Fuyukura’s branch was left out of the loop, giving her a chance to rebel.

“But how strange. She should not have the money to pull off a coup in

the first place. I don't think any financial affairs were left in her hands, so how could she overturn the organization itself?"

Something was odd. Sure, maybe she could have taken over the Tokai Bloc branch alone, but it was weird that she had managed to take over the entire order. The other branches would not have stood by and watched.

"…You'll be upset if you hear this, won't you…?"

"Do you still think you have a choice?" Kiyomizu allowed him a glimpse of several needles. "I will stab you with every one of these I have. They are all poison-tipped. This one will give you athlete's foot, this one will give you a mouth ulcer, this one will make your armpits smell, and this one will make your snoring very loud!"

They were all poisons with boring effects, but they nonetheless sounded very irritating.

"Sh-she invited us on a luxury cruise…"

"And?"

"Inside was a massive casino…"

"Mm-hmm."

"I was so engrossed in the gambling that, next thing I knew, I had lost all our assets… And Sairi had bought everything that once belonged to the Jouryuuji clan name…"

Kiyomizu whipped out a folding fan, seemingly from thin air.

"What? Where did you get that—?"

"From a secret bag connected to the fourth dimension!"

And she used the fan to mercilessly thwack her father. A lot.

"This is from me! This is from our family! This is from everyone else in the order! Feel the pain!"

"Buh! Buh! B— Guh! Stop, I'm going to die, I'm going to die…"

"This won't kill you! And what happened to all our members? Our organization is bigger than just the Jouryuuji clan!"

The scope of the Virginal Father was such that they had the manpower to rival the Sacred Blood Empire's forces. Obviously, not all those people belonged to the Jouryuuji family.

"Lower-level members of the order were all let go, and then Sairi helped them get stable jobs elsewhere. Now that their livelihoods are secure, it seems their hatred toward the Sacred Blooded naturally faded away on its own…"

The organization had collapsed while Kiyomizu wasn't looking. She felt completely blindsided.

"So as it stands, the Jouryuuji family has lost everything… I suppose it's just a product of the changing times. It's basically impossible for us to exterminate the Sacred Blooded at this point, which leaves the radicals without a clear goal. So maybe this was for the best—**though that doesn't erase your sins, foolish father of mine**."

"Ah, so you *are* angry with me…"

"Of course, once all this simmers down, I will give you a very thorough denunciation."

"I think you've just signaled my death, plot-wise… N-now what—?"

"So, foolish father, am I correct to assume that the Virginal Father is currently being run by Sairi Fuyukura and her lackeys without our permission?"

Kiyomizu had ignored her father's comment.

"Yes, that is correct… In reality, it is now an entirely different organization made up of a small, select few."

"First, we will look at their organization and decide what to do from there. You do have a list of people, don't you?"

Her father went to a drawer farther back in the cave and pulled out a piece of paper.

"This is the list of new members. Our clan is totally absent…"

"Hmm, let's see… Who's left? ……"

"Hmm? What is it? Why did you go quiet?"

"I'm not sure what to make of this list. I would be nervous if it was filled with radicals, but that doesn't seem to be the case… I am not sure what criteria she used to choose these people. There are quite a few new members as well…"

There had to be a common link among them somewhere. But whatever it was eluded Kiyomizu.

"Maybe she only took people with English proficiency test scores over eight hundred."

"Quite bold of you to be joking around." She thwacked him with her fan again. Though he was her father, she showed no mercy.

"Or maybe she is simply surrounding herself with powerful people…?"

"I'd be able to tell by their names alone if that were the case. It doesn't

seem like she's basing this on skill."

"Academic history, then?"

"I will pluck out your beard if you make another joke."

"No, please! I am bald; all I have left is my beard!"

"What?! You didn't shave your head to become a priest?! You just went bald?! I had no idea! How shocking!"

"I was a troublemaker when I was young. I dyed my hair so much I damaged my scalp…"

"Just stop talking, please. Starting now, I will act as head of the Jouryuuji household. I think that would be much better."

"Oh… Please let me be head of household a little longer…? At least nominally…?"

Kiyomizu plucked five hairs from his beard.

"Ouch… Very well. Go on and be head of household…"

"I shall humbly take on the position."

And so Kiyomizu Jouryuuji, new head of the family, was born. Other family members around them started whispering their approval among themselves ("Yeah, Kiyomizu would be great," "Let's let Kiyomizu take over"). The change was made without much incident.

"Still, what is going on in your head, Sairi…? All I can imagine is that you're plotting something. Anyway, foolish father of mine, bring a map to your new leader."

"A world map?"

She smacked him again with her fan. "It should really be obvious, but I want a map of the Jouryuuji Temple and the Oshiro area. And bring me some colored pens, if you will."

When the map came to her, she drew a big circle around the temple marker.

That was Jouryuuji Temple. If that was Sairi's base, then she would have a firm footing to control the entirety of the Oshiro area. But it seemed that for the moment, the grotto of meditation, which was situated behind the temple, was safe. Only the family knew about this place, and it was unlikely that Sairi and her crew would come snooping around here.

Or maybe what Sairi was after was at the *front* of the temple.

"It seems it's all coming back to Jouryuuji Temple, in the truest sense of the word."

Kiyomizu drew an arrow up from the temple marker.

What it pointed to was beyond the mountains: Akinomiya—the current Sacred Blood Empire.

Sairi was plotting something against them.

One of Kiyomizu's classmates immediately came to mind.

It wasn't Ryouta. He wasn't of Sacred Blood, so he wasn't a threat.

What will happen to Shiren Fuyukura?

Her mother might be poised to attack. Not only would she have to deal with the direct threat, but as Sairi's daughter, her position within the Empire was also in danger.

Though, Kiyomizu still wasn't sure what Sairi was thinking.

I just can't believe that someone who hated the Sacred Blooded would be able to spend so long a time among them. But it is true that the emperor died with impeccable timing…

There were so many peculiarities about the situation.

"I have quite a bad feeling about this… Maybe I should stay away from the Empire for the time being… I am sad I won't be able to see Ryouta dearest, but I will just have to make do with my special-order body pillow…"

But before that, there was something else she had to take care of.

"Foolish father of mine, pick the five most capable people we have."

"Why? Are you going drinking…?"

She smacked his bald head with her fan.

"We're infiltrating Jouryuuji Temple for surveillance."

"What? That sounds scary…," he said, and she gave him another smack. It was about time he took this seriously.

FAMILY
HEAD

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“Not knowing what’s going on in someone’s head is much scarier to me.”

“I have nothing going on in mine, Kiyomizu.”

“Get it together, you!!”

Kiyomizu, now genuinely angry, gave him a good smack on the face.

“Ohhh… I knew it, unfortunate news was waiting for me…”

As soon as Tamaki came to the Fuyukura household, she burst into tears.

Kokoko, who had come along with her, was acting cool and unaffected.

“Ahhh… Terrifying people are coming to attack us… I know I will be the first one to die… And I know I’ll only be killed after being subject to acts that cannot be detailed in a teen-rated novel… Ohhh, maybe I should end it all now while I can…?”

A warning had been broadcast to the entirety of the Empire, saying that a terrorist organization called the Virginal Father may soon be attacking, and the news had now even reached civilians like Tamaki.

Some time had passed since the Empire was founded, however, so the populace in general was optimistic about the matter. For the most part no one believed that something so dangerous would actually come to pass, and there was no public disorder.

The majority had settled back into the daily routines they had been used to in Japan. A dearth of caution was a problem, but it was still much better than devolving into a panic.

“Oh no, oh no… What if they target Nine-to-Eleven…? It would cost so much to repair if they destroyed the store… Oh, but I’ll be dead before then. *Phew*... There’s nothing to worry about after all. How fortunate… I’m so, so fortunate!”

That didn’t apply to negative people like Tamaki, though.

“Calm down, Tamaki! There’s no need to twist misfortune into fortune like that!”

It seemed like she might leave and never return, so Shiren cut in. Since the bad news was also coming from outside Tamaki this time, the negative energy just kept getting thicker.

“We don’t even know when the enemy might strike, so it helps no one to start cowering now. And so long as we keep our doors and windows locked,

we should be okay…”

“But you’ll be taken away from us, Shiren… And then I’ll be slaughtered along with the rest of the background characters… I’ll be like one of those random punks, out in the city in the middle of the night, who gets beaten to death within the first three pages of a manga…”

“Don’t worry. Your store shuts at eleven PM, so you’re not going to get killed in the middle of the night on the job.”

“Actually, we’re currently testing earlier closing hours, nine PM instead of eleven, to cut back on costs…”

“So you’re not much different from a regular supermarket, then…”

“The Virginal Father can come whenever they like… It’s the end for me… Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

Tamaki was despairing, like both a wake and a funeral had come at the same time. She had apparently come over today to bid her final farewells.

Pat, pat.

Kokoko gently patted her on the shoulder.

She was starting to seem a lot more like the older sister in their relationship. Which was actually more accurate age-wise.

“Big Sis Tamaki, being so pessimistic about this won’t solve anything.”

“I know that, but…even if I do go home, I’ll be faced with a mountain of jam rolls…”

That’s right—her hundred-thousand-jam-roll problem still hadn’t been solved.

“We already sold ninety thousand copies of *Kairakuten*, so we’re all right on that front…”

“Why are so many Imperial citizens buying that?! In terms of population density, that number is way too high! People are definitely buying more than one, aren’t they?!” Ryouta couldn’t help commenting. The Empire seemed to be quite the hot spot for *Kairakuten* readers.

“Everyone buys six: one to use, one to save, one to look at, one to proselytize, one to offer to the ancestors, and one to place under the bed as a decoy to distract from the truly heinous things farther back.”

“That is not suitable to offer to your ancestors! And what are these ‘truly heinous things’?!”

“Something like a truly awful fantasy story you wrote in middle school.”

“I guess it *would* really hurt if one of your friends found that!”

Ryouta didn’t have anything of that sort, but if he did, he would certainly put it somewhere no one else could find it.

“But if you sold so much, didn’t you make a lot of money…?”

“No… We came to a difficult decision. Either we would have to shorten operating hours, or try to survive by going against public standards of decency… I even had the idea to change our name to *Superb Books* and sell only things of that nature…”

“I wouldn’t be able to openly support it, but…a person needs income, so I can’t really criticize you, either…”

“Personally, I think we *should* call ourselves *Superb Books* and make an age-restricted area. Because I’m—”

Tamaki brought her arm forward.

There was a labelled band around it.

“—the class librarian! Perhaps it’s fate that my home is to become a bookstore!”

She was surprisingly enthusiastic about it.

“Hey, you’re right! You’re our librarian, Shijou! But there’s something a little off about this project! I’m glad you’re excited for once, but something is definitely wrong!”

As Ryouta struggled to keep up with this situation, Shiren turned to speak to him.

“Ryouta, I have never seen Tamaki shine so brightly before. You should let her do what she wants. Isn’t that the least we can do?”

“You’re acting like a mom tenderly encouraging your daughter to follow her dreams and become a manga artist, but this is in no way an inspiring scenario, okay?”

“Wh-why did you make that comparison…? That would make you and me like husband and wife…”

Shiren’s face went red.

“No! Why would you misinterpret it like *that*?! Why did you come to *that* conclusion?!”

“B-because…you’re like the dad who tries to stop her by saying, *The manga world is too brutal for a tenderhearted kid like you. I gave up on my dream of becoming a manga artist long ago and decided to become a writer instead*. And I’m like the mom who takes her side and says, *Our daughter*

is being serious when she says she wants to do this, so we should let her."

"You've put way too much thought into this original setting; I'm not sure what I should comment on first. You didn't have to add that part about the dad giving up on the path of manga and becoming an author. You could have stuck with a regular office worker or something."

"I wanted to depict the warped feelings of a father trying to stop his daughter from going down the path he gave up on by telling her she has no talent."

"Why do you insist on making it messed up?!"

"The mom, by the way, stepped back from her career as a floral arrangement specialist after giving birth, but when she sees how enthusiastic her daughter is, she decides to return to wo—"

"Okay, enough! No more adding on to this! Stop making up OCs in your runaway imagination!"

It was Shiren's fault that their conversation had derailed onto another planet.

"But I am going to die when the Virginal Father attacks, aren't I…? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha."

"Oh, *phew*. There's the Shijou I know."

Ryouta knew this was a bad thought to have, but he wasn't really sure how to deal with a positive Tamaki.

"Right, Big Sis Tamaki. If you're going to die, then you should at least do what you've always wanted to do before you go," Kokoko casually suggested.

"What I want to do before I die…? I think I want to be able to list off all of Japan's prime ministers in order."

"You're not aiming very high for your bucket list, Big Sis."

"Oh, but I can say all fifteen Tokugawa shoguns. Actually, I can list off all the shoguns after the Kamakura period."

"That's actually pretty incredible. Not a lot of people can list the Sekke or Imperial Family shoguns. Oh, wait, that's not the point." Kokoko decided on Tamaki's behalf, since they weren't getting anywhere at this rate. "It has to be something more sensual."

"What…?"

"Hey, Ryouta Fuyukura, **do something sexual with Big Sis Tamaki**."

Ryouta had received a most unbelievable request.

Shiren's eyes widened in shock.

So did Ryouta's.

His thought processes came to a complete stop for a moment. He heard the words, but he couldn't interpret the meaning…

It took him three whole seconds to boot back up again.

"What are you talking about?!"

"Yeah, what he said! There's a time and place for everything! Even if our characters are on the slightly older side, that is way too forward!"

"Ah, eep… Kokoko, stop—eek…ah…"

Tamaki didn't know what to say, either.

Naturally, everyone besides Kokoko was bewildered.

"It's fine. She's going to die anyway, right? She should have the experience at least once. Once she dies, she won't need to worry about shame or reputation."

"Hey, Kokoko, cool it." Ryouta grabbed one of Kokoko's ears.

"Gah! Stop! That's not a handle!"

"You have gone way too far off topic. You told Shijou to do what she wants before she dies. How would doing something she doesn't even want to do help her?!"

"Sheesh. You're a moron, Ryouta." Kokoko huffed. "I know what Big Sis Tamaki wants to do."

Tamaki's face was almost scarlet. "Kokoko, please don't make any more jokes… Ah…"

She fell silent.

It was a silence rich in meaning.

Tamaki wasn't the only one with a flushed face—Ryouta and Shiren had them, too.

Shiren, especially…

"Oh… Ryouta… Um…ah…um…ah…"

"What is it, Shiren…? Calm down…"

But Ryouta wasn't calm, either. The whole atmosphere had gotten very uncomfortable, thanks to Kokoko's comment.

Shiren was staring at Tamaki, and her eyes were brimming with tears.

"Sh-Shiren…?"

"We're friends, right? Tamaki…?"

"I don't know if trash like myself could ever have a meaningful

existence, but I am happy to hear you think of me that way…”

Shiren shut something out in her heart.

“Oooh… I-I’m going to go shopping now! I’m going shopping! I’m going out to do shopping! Come on, Kokoko! We won’t be back for a while! Whooo, I’m going to buy some tomatoes at Freshmart Warakia! I’ll buy so many, I won’t even be able to eat them all!”

Shiren grabbed Kokoko’s hand and went straight out of the house.

Sh-she can’t be…trying to be considerate about this, can she…?

His eyes accidentally locked with Tamaki’s; she was the only one left.

“Oh—Ry-Ryouta… Kokoko is a pathological liar… Or maybe I’ve had a bad upbringing, and I’ve had a corrupting influence on her, and now she’s saying things like that, um…”

Tamaki faltered, unsure what else to say.

“That’s not true… You’re not corrupt, Shijou…”

“I’m fine being corrupt… Ah—”

That may have been a slip of the tongue, but…

But once she said it, it seemed like a switch had flipped on inside her.

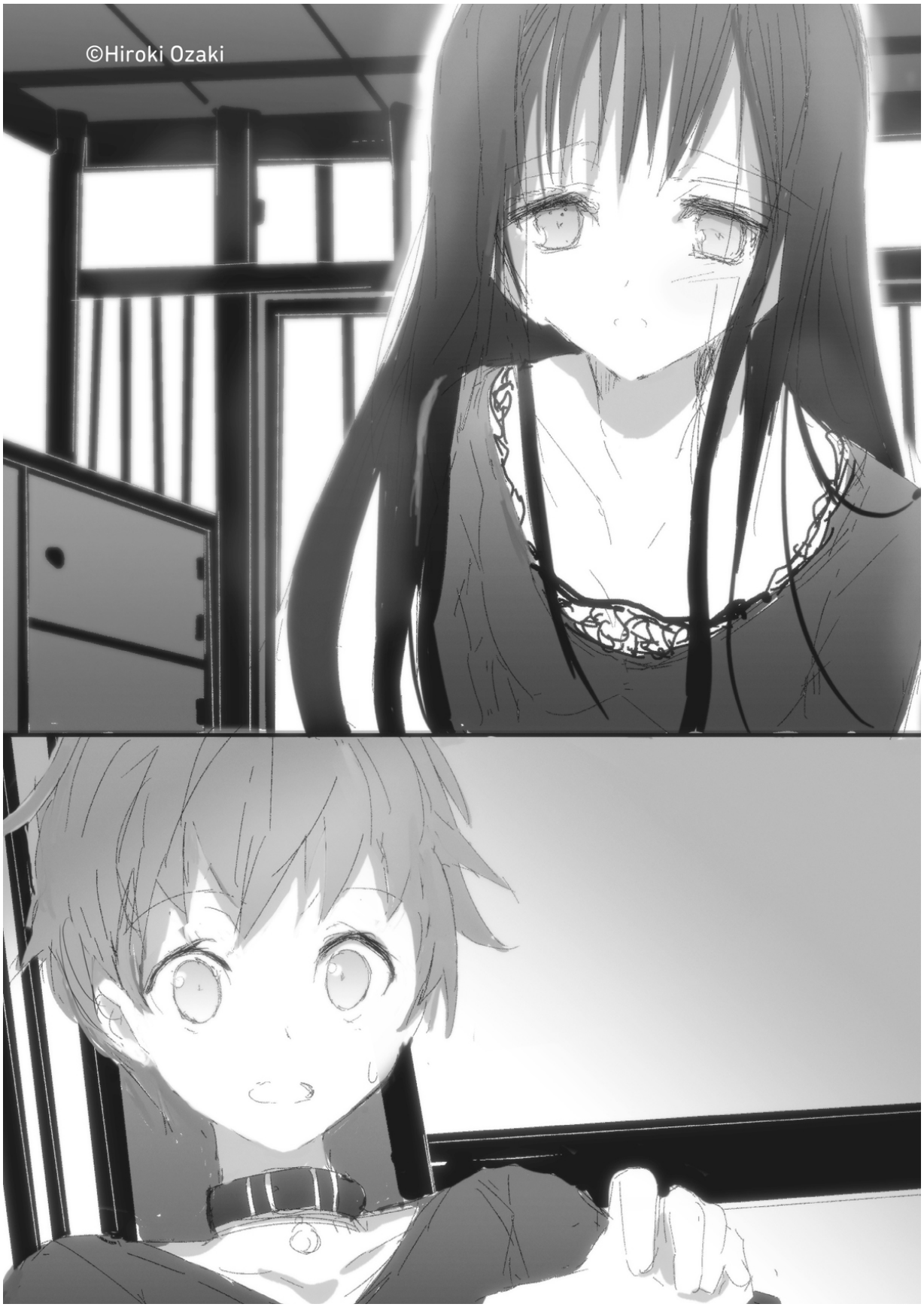
“Ryouta… If you don’t mind a piece of garbage like me, then…let’s do corrupt things together…”

Tamaki took one step toward Ryouta.

“Um, Shijou…?” Ryouta’s mind went blank.

He tried to back up, but soon, he was flush against a pillar.

Tamaki was getting closer. “Y-you’re all right with this, right…? J-j-just once is all right, right…? I’m going to die anyway, so it’ll be all right, right…?”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Tamaki had come close enough to touch him.

She reached out with her left hand to touch his cheek.

Smack.

A dry slapping sound rang out as something collided with her left hand.

A right hand was holding it in place—Tamaki's right hand.

"Aaaaah! I can't do this! I'd be worse than garbage if I was to betray Shiren's friendship! Garbage has pride, too, you know! Please do not underestimate what garbage can do! Garbage knows it belongs in the can, okay?!" Tamaki screamed, her eyes tearing up. "If I do this, I'll just be going with the flow instead of making my own decisions! I wouldn't be able to look anyone in the eye ever again!" There was a will in her gaze that Ryouta had never seen before. "I'll go find the others right away! Stay here, Ryouta!"

She turned to leave the house.

Her teary eyes had spilled over now, and she was openly sobbing.

"This won't make me happy! I have to win in my own garbage way! Nothing less will do!"

Once he was alone, Ryouta took his first real deep breath in a while.

That was close. Had she kept going, he probably wouldn't have been able to stop himself.

I almost became heir to a convenience store, or maybe an adult bookstore… Just moments away…

Fifteen minutes later.

"Ryouta, we're home…"

"We're back now…"

"These new snacks are delicious. *Chomp, chomp.*"

In came an exhausted Shiren and Tamaki, and a relaxed Kokoko.

"I'm not sure what's going on, but everything's settled now, right…?"

Not even Ryouta knew what to say; he just felt awkward.

"For now, bring tea for everyone, Ryouta. And then go and stay over there."

And so Ryouta had been gracelessly shooed away.

After Tamaki had had some tea and calmed down somewhat, Kokoko looked up at her without raising her head.

"I gave you the biggest and best chance you will ever get. So I guess this is your answer, Big Sis."

“W-well… It would’ve been unforgivable… How awful would it be to treat Shiren that way…?”

“If that’s how you really feel, then I have nothing to say.”

Pat, pat.

Kokoko patted Tamaki’s shoulder again.

“You chose friendship, and that’s your answer. Be proud of it.”

“A-all right… I wasn’t ready yet… I will do my best the next opportunity I get…”

Tamaki nodded slowly.

“I think things will only get harder for you now that you’ve let this chance slip by. But I guess you’re okay with that.”

“Yes. I can’t give up just because I’m the underdog… It’s more my style to bet on a one-in-a-hundred chance anyway.”

“You’re growing up, Tamaki.” Kokoko smiled, her expression still calm. “But it’s not really one in a hundred. You should probably consider dropping out of the race. At best, it’s more like one in ten thousand.”

“Could you possibly raise the chances just a little bit…? At least make it three in ten thousand…”

Kokoko was surprisingly realistic. “Shiren, I’m sorry for causing you all that trouble. But it worked out in the end, so forgive me. I went too far to make Big Sis Tamaki happy. I should stop doing that.”

“I—I trusted Tamaki, okay…? I wasn’t worried at all… I just cried a little because I was so surprised…”

Both Shiren’s and Tamaki’s eyes were still red. Both of them had shed tears, even though they weren’t sure if they were sad or not.

“*Munch, munch, crunch.* Looking at you two, I’ve realized how difficult friendship can be. There’s still a lot I need to learn, it seems. Anyway, these snacks are great. *Munch, munch, munch.* Their one flaw is the small package size. *Crunch, crunch, crunch.*”

“If you’re going to give us grown-up advice, you could at least finish eating your snack first!”

Her childlike appearance really made it hard to take her seriously.

“All right, we’re going home… I need to take care of all those jam rolls.”

“Right, good luck.”

“I’ll probably be eating nothing but jam rolls for three months.”

“Well… Try to make sure you get all the necessary nutrients…”

“Oh, and Ryouta?” Before leaving, Tamaki turned to Ryouta.

“Uh, yeah?”

“I’m leaving you fifty copies of *Kairakuten*, okay?”

“No thank you! I’m not even old enough to have one!”

“That was a joke.”

“It’s hard to tell when you’re joking, Shijou…”

“Oh, and if you make some mistakes in the future and decide you wouldn’t mind working in a convenience store, please give me a call.”

“Oh…sure.”

“If that happens, I’ll serve you for the rest of my life…”

“What?”

He had the feeling he’d just heard Tamaki say something very unusual.

Her face was bright red, but she seemed a little proud. “I am a pessimist, but I am not a liar.”

“Oh, uh, yeah…”

“I’ll be off, then. Let’s go home, Kokoko.”

“Okay. You know, it seems like maybe I don’t need to look after you anymore, Big Sis Tamaki.”

This was apparently a satisfying conclusion for Kokoko.

But she then added, “It sure would be nice if things continued like this, without any more fighting.” She sighed, like an older lady might. “But things never go the way we want them to, do they?”

“Hey, stop being so ominous. It’s creeping me out.” Shiren shot her down with a frown.

“If words are enough to bother you, then you’ll really be in trouble when reality hits. The one to make the next big decision probably isn’t going to be Big Sis Tamaki. It might be you.”

Kokoko’s remark stuck with Shiren.

Meanwhile…

“Mm-hmm, is that so…? In that case, you can confirm that there’s no involvement whatsoever on the national level?”

…Alfoncina sat in the First Cathedral office, talking on the phone.

On the other end of the line was a certain central figure from the country

of Japan.

“I see. Japan would indeed face inevitable chaos if the Empire was to collapse now and create that many refugees~. So there’s no way you would go along with such a dangerous scheme~.”

Alfoncina scribbled “no Japan involvement” on her notepad.

This was exactly the response she had been expecting.

The assumption of the Sacred Blood Empire’s existence had, for better or for worse, solidified in the Japanese national consciousness. And on the economic side of things, the Empire was essentially another market within Japan. Attempting to crush it at this point would be a losing move, and thus, very unlikely.

Then could this be the work of a cult with no concern for consequences?

“Oh, in that case, have you heard of the Virginal Father? I’m sure you’ve heard the name, at least~. They haven’t been acting suspiciously, have they? They’ve been pretty quiet of late~.”

Once she knew how the order was doing internally, she would know how to handle them.

“What? They’re in disarray, partially dissolved?”

The news was so anticlimactic, Alfoncina was stupefied.

“All right, I think I have the gist of it~. Thank you, as always, for you-know-what. Until next time~.”

But the other end did not hang up.

“What? You want to know what’s happening with *that*?”

Alfoncina turned around to visually sweep the room. No one was there.

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Just in case, she opened the door to make sure no one was outside, then locked it.

"In short, the feeling is there. I am thinking about it," she said quietly into the receiver. "But her defenses are formidable. Asking directly is not going to work; I don't have anything to hold over her, and she is not hurting for money." A dark smile crossed her face. "Yes, I know you are willing to pay whatever it takes. But this is not something that can be solved with money. People's hearts are not so easily moved."

Of all the people in the Empire, she was the only one who knew about this.

In fact, it was something the emperor herself must not discover. If she found out, Alfoncina's position would be in great danger.

The reward would be considerable, of course. And that was why she had only said she would give it a shot. No commitment had been made.

"I am trying to pique her interest by letting her know it was much more fun than I thought, but she is a very busy person, and it just might not work~. Well, I'll do what I can. Yes. I'm glad you understand."

The person on the other end of the call seemed to have decided there wasn't much point in pushing further.

"All right, so we'll wait on the plan to sell out Ouka as an idol."

As it happened, Alfoncina had secretly received a certain request from Japan: *Can you make Ouka Sarano an idol?*

There were plenty of reasons to try it. If the emperor could get her face into the living rooms of ordinary people, they might feel closer to the Sacred Blooded, and it might erase any lingering feelings of unease about the formation of the Empire. For all intents and purposes, she looked Japanese, and considering she'd grown up there, she was fully fluent in the language. It might even create a pretext for the Sacred Blood Empire to be accepted as a special zone, in a one-country-two-systems–type setup.

And finally, it probably appealed to the government executives' "interests."

In fact, that was likely the main reason; everything else was just icing on the cake.

"And Ouka can be quite prickly, you see~. The whole thing might just provoke her, so perhaps it would be better to find someone meeker~. With Ouka, it might even lead to an international incident~."

She had the feeling that Ouka was likely to drop some bombshells if she appeared on a talk show. Actually—she definitely would.

"So I think it'd be safer to push for another girl~. Someone on the weaker side, but who would still do as she's told. And more importantly, someone very pretty… Oh, I know." A light bulb suddenly went on in Alfoncina's head. "If I may, I know someone more than qualified. Her name is Tamaki Shijou~. I'll e-mail you an image of her right now. There, sent~. What do you think? Will she work? Ah, she's perfect? I know she's quite in need of money right now, so I believe she'll agree to it readily. I'll do what I can to convince her~."

Tamaki, at that time, would never have imagined a plan like this was in motion, not in her wildest dreams.

But for now, Alfoncina hung up the phone and took a deep breath.

"Tamaki, you deserve much more than a life spent working at a convenience store."

The conversation had veered extremely far away from the Virginal Father.

That wouldn't do, so Alfoncina cleared her throat and got back to work. "For the moment, I've confirmed that Japan is not involved. And it doesn't seem to be a wide-scale operation, either~."

In that case, they may not need to mind Sairi much at all. However, the woman was still a very enigmatic figure. It was best they stay on guard as much as possible.

Personally, Alfoncina wasn't quite sure what to make of Sairi Fuyukura.

She had played the part of the previous emperor's lover—er, his second wife, all while completely obfuscating her involvement with the Virginal Father. She wasn't just in hiding; for years, she had brazenly lived alongside Shiren as her mother.

And nevertheless, she had assassinated the previous emperor at precisely the right moment and vanished without a trace. Without Ouka's shrewd intelligence, the Sacred Blood Empire would have never come into being.

Had Sairi Fuyukura loved the emperor?

Had she pledged her loyalty to the order?

Or had it been a scheme of her own devising?

Her motives remained elusive, which made it hard to give an answer.

Alfoncina's eyes darted toward the statue of the Goddess of Blood—had

blood just trickled down from one of its eyes?

"Oh, it's just condensation."

Thanks to the recent humidity, droplets had formed on the metallic statue. Still, it felt ominous.

"This makes me want to summon Ryouta…"

She was uneasy. She wanted to call on her minion, on someone reliable whom she knew would come to her side.

She left the room and went to sit at the altar. If she prayed here, she knew that Ryouta would soon be with her.

But—

"That is not a proper thing for an archbishop to do."

She would pray. But she would change the contents of her prayer.

"May our country be protected; may our people be at ease…"

What she needed to do now was pray for all the people living in the Empire. That was her job.

"Archbishop-hood isn't a very glamorous position…but I suppose I have no choice right now. And I am worried."

She gripped harder onto her prayer staff.

"I'll pull an all-nighter! Apologies, but I'm putting *YouRou IKou!* on hiatus so I can pray!"

But just then, her phone rang.

"Good grief! I was trying to concentrate! Hello! Oh, my editor dearest! Yes, this is Kin Hayashimori."

She had gotten a call from her editor on *YouRou IKou!*

"What? My latest chapter is becoming too much of a serious romance…? You don't mind if I do lesbian gags, but taking it this seriously might shock my readers…?"

This was a problem she hadn't been expecting.

"Oh, no~. Nothing happened in my real life to influence this at all~. I'm telling you, you're reading too much into it. This isn't autobiographical, so no need to worry about that~."

Perhaps it had seeped into her writing naturally. If so, it had been completely unconscious on her part. What a surprise.

"And so what would you like me to do about it?"

Over the phone, she was told that it would not be a good idea for Ryuko Koson, a minor character, to profess her love to a main character. At this

point, it had become a running joke that this minor character failed every time to express her true feelings, so if she was to actually confess, then the running joke would be put to bed for good.

"No," Alfoncina asserted, resolute. "Ryuko Koson needs to tell her how she feels. She had never been able to put it into words before, but now she's going to get everything out at once. She may be poor at speaking, but she is an earnest character! I feel strongly that with the story going in its current direction, she would confess! I will not compromise here!"

Her editor seemed surprised.

"I am not getting worked up. Even if it's a gag comic, I will not make my characters lie. That is all. If we twist the story to meet your demands now, the drama will become forced sooner or later. And besides, there's no way this one thing will suddenly cause the fan base to leave, so please let me do it my way."

She got the approval. Alfoncina's opinion had won out.

"*Phew.* I suppose it's okay for me to be selfish sometimes, too~."

An image of Ouka popped up in Alfoncina's head.

"Ah, sorry, I was talking to myself. Thank you very much. I'll be staying up all night as well~."

A shocked response came from the other end of the receiver. Her deadline was still a ways away.

"You know I'm juggling multiple jobs." A professional smile crossed her face. "Any adult would take both seriously."

Her editor laughed. *"Aren't you a high schooler, Hayashimori?"*

"High schoolers are adults, too, you know."

Jouryuuji Temple Visitor's Guide

Allow me to introduce you to Jouryuuji Temple!

Main Temple	Hall for worshipping the temple's main deity, Acala
Amida Hall	Hall for worshipping the Amida Buddha
Aizen Hall	Hall for worshipping Ragaraja
Dainichi Hall	Hall for worshipping the Dainichi Buddha
Ascetic Training Hall	Hall worshipping ascetic practitioners
Pagoda	Important cultural artifact
East Building	Used for conventions and fanwork fairs
West Building	Used for conventions and fanwork fairs
Industry Booths	Used for conventions and fanwork fairs
Bell Tower	Used to signify the opening and closing of conventions and fanwork fairs
Grotto of Meditation	Cave for training located in the mountains

Both you and Ouka use up too much space for conventions!

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EPISODE 4

LET'S LEAD NORMAL LIVES FOR NOW!

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EPISODE 4

LET'S LEAD NORMAL LIVES FOR NOW!

The next day was exceedingly normal.

Ryouta went to school as usual (with the collar around his neck), made a slip of the tongue by saying, "Hey, did you shrink? Are you done growing?" to Shiren, then writhed in pain on the floor when she poked his eyes, accidentally saw up Sasara's skirt while he was writhing around, and almost got killed… An all-around average day for him.

There were a few things that were a little different, though. Like how Kiyomizu was absent, how Alfoncina seemed sleepier than usual, and how Tamaki ate ten jam rolls for lunch—but everything else was mostly normal. Ryouta and Shiren ate the jam rolls that Tamaki couldn't finish.

After school, they went to Freshmart Warakia and bought supplies for dinner, then headed home.

Ryouta made dinner—omelet over rice with plenty of tomatoes.

Afterward, Rei came over to help Shiren with science.

"Okay, um, rocks don't photosynthesize! Low atmospheric pressure and photosynthesis are unrelated! The North Star and photosynthesis are unrelated! We add mint to ice cream to make it taste and look better, not to increase the umami flavor using photosynthesis!"

"What?! I answered *photosynthesis* for every question, and not one of them was right?!"

"You don't need to use that technique right now! You need to focus on *ehem* at first! *Ehem! Ehem!* If you can grasp *ehem*, then you can put it to practical use!"

She was choking, so it was hard to understand, but it seemed like she was trying to say that the most important thing was grasping the basics.

"Anyway, this is way too sloppy, even for random guessing. You won't get any points if the questions are true or false and you write in the letters *A* through *E*!"

“Oh no! I didn’t read the question!”

Ryouta sat to the side reading manga, thinking about how this, too, was the same as always. His grades weren’t the best in his class, but he certainly didn’t need this level of review.

“Oh yeah, the results of the mock test I took before should have come back by now. How did I do?”

Shiren had, apparently, rashly taken on a mock exam.

“Ah, *ehem, ehem*… They did come back, but they were so awful I didn’t show you…”

“Yeah, but we also had exams for kind of low-level schools, so I should’ve gotten a D or C at least.”

Sacred Blood First University Grade:	**Know your place.**
Sanguinary International University Grade:	**This is not a playground.**
Blood Environmental College Grade:	*PFFFT.*
Sacred Blood College Grade:	**You? Wanna go to college?? At your level?? LMAO**
Junior High Review College Grade:	**Unfortunately, we cannot accept you at this time.**

“What are these grades?! Aren’t they usually A or B or C or something?!”

“You did so badly that they had to take special measures, it seems. You added a new page to mock test history.”

She was much worse, of course, than any of them could have imagined.

“Oh, but one place gave you an offer!”

“What?! There’s a scouting system?! Well, I guess some people know my talent when they see it!”

“The Primate Research Institute gave you an offer: *We would like to compare you with Kenji the chimpanzee to see which of you is more intelligent…*”

“Hey, now they’re just making fun of me!”

“Kenji wrote a comment for you. *Eee! Eee! I’m going to send you into next week, come at me! Eee! Eee! It’ll be over in a second! Eee! Eee!*”

“What is this, a prewrestling match interview?! And that chimpanzee sure talks a lot!”

“Well, there are still some mock tests left we can do, so give it your best next time, okay…? To be honest, I have zero expectations.”

“Mm-hmm, I’ll make it work. That’s right, there’s always next time. Next time…”

Ryouta could tell that Shiren’s energy had drained a bit.

“Well, let’s call it here for today~. I need to get home soon; otherwise, I might collapse on the way back. *Ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem…*”

Rei began putting her things away.

“Thanks for coming, Rei,” Ryouta said.

“It’s just part of my job. I know it’s all wasted effort, but I’ll keep at it as her tutor.”

“Um, you really shouldn’t say ‘wasted effort’ out loud like that.”

“It may be painful, but we need to face reality. A rotten apple will always be rotten.”

A complaint rose up from behind them. “What rotten apple?! At least make me a rotten tomato!” But they both ignored it.

“Oh, Ryou?”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“You’ve been living in the Empire for a while now, but do you think you’ll ever want to go back to Japan?” Rei asked casually.

“Well, since I don’t live here alone… And it’s not like I could really enjoy a trip back anyway…”

“Oh, I guess that’s true~. Well, I was just thinking, we’re all right now, but I don’t know what will happen to the Empire in the future. But if we start speculating on that, it’ll never end, will it?”

Rei was already putting her shoes on by the door.

“But *you’re* not planning on going back, are you, Rei?”

“It’s more fun here for now, and you’re here, Ryou. But we do have to think about things in the long term. We have long lives ahead of us… Oh no, I’m going into a fit…” *Thud.*

“Don’t say ‘we have long lives ahead of us’ and then collapse right afterward!”

Ten minutes later, she came back around.

“I had a dream about a lovely field of flowers. There were so many red spider lilies.”

“Right… Aren’t red spider lilies supposed to grow in the afterlife…?”

“There was someone there, too. His name sounded foreign. I think he said it was Owen.”

“Huh, weird place to be getting your international exchange in, Rei…”

“Well, see you tomorrow. *Ehem, ehem, ehem*.”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

“Oh, Kiyomizu wasn’t here today.”

“Yeah, she hasn’t been around lately.”

There was a hue of suspicion in Rei’s eyes.

“Just because the two of you are alone together, don’t think about doing anything inappropriate, okay? Your sister would never approve.”

“We won’t! I wouldn’t even think of it!”

“You’d best not. If I hear something happened, then I might collapse from the shock.”

“You’ll collapse even without any shock.”

“Oh no! Another fit…” *Thud.*

“There you go again!”

Fifteen minutes later, she woke up.

“Owen professed his love for me… He said he loved me dearly, but we live in different worlds, so it’ll never work out.”

“I think that guy is dead… You sure are finding romance in the weirdest places, Rei…”

“Well, I turned him down right away. I still have to look out for you for the foreseeable future, Ryou,” she said proudly.

“You’re making me feel guilty. Please just go and get married if you find someone you love…”

As her little brother, Ryouta was more than a little distressed that she was letting chances at her own happiness slip by. She may look young, but she was still a fully-fledged adult.

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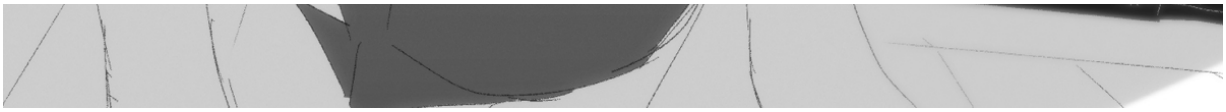


“No need to worry. I’m waiting.” She smiled with glee.

“Waiting for the one?”

“For the laws to be amended so that brothers and sisters can get married!”

“Wait, wait, wait! What does *that* mean?!”

“Exactly what I said, Ryou.” A mischievous smile crossed her face. “I can keep on living so long as you’re around!”

She puffed out her chest in pride and made a peace sign.

She looked more like a younger sister than an older sister.

“Oh, another fit…” *Thud.*

“Are you sure about that?!”

She woke up three minutes later. She’d recovered relatively quickly this time.

“I think Owen dragged me back. But the police arrested him for interfering with the living, so things should all right now.”

“Your existence is way too fragile, Rei.”

After that, Rei finally went home.

With just Shiren and Ryouta alone now, there was a shift in the air in their house.

It was a change that no one besides them could sense. Although they hadn’t spent decades together, it had been long enough to notice this kind of thing.

“I know this is obvious, Ryouta, but things are so ordinary.”

“Of course. Nothing unusual has happened.”

“If only things could stay ordinary forever. I’m going to answer all my science questions with *photosynthesis* tomorrow, too.”

“You should at least show improvement in that department!”

“Tomorrow, we’ll be starting the Sengoku period in Japanese history, so I’m going to answer *Himiko* for all the questions.”

“No! She’s from, like, a thousand years before the Sengoku period! At least write down *Nobunaga Oda*!”

“Don’t you think they might take us by surprise and ask a question like *Hideyoshi Toyotomi unified Japan, but who was the queen of Yamatai-koku*?”

“No! Yamatai-koku isn’t Sengoku period, I keep telling you! And if you know about Hideyoshi Toyotomi, then you should at least get one answer

right!”

“I can remember right now, but I’m the kind of person that goes blank as soon as I’m faced with the test. I won’t be able to tell Hideyoshi Toyotomi from Commodore Perry.”

“Their era, pronunciation, spelling, and even *nationality* are totally different. They don’t have one thing in common.”

“Anyway, I’m going to answer *Himiko* for everything tomorrow! No, actually, I’ll answer *Perry* for everything, because it’s shorter!”

“At least pick Hideyoshi Toyotomi or Nobunaga Oda!”

“I don’t want easy success. Success only has meaning when you put effort into it.”

“Sure, it sounds cool when you say it, but in this context, it is beyond uncool.”

“Actually, I’ve come a long way. I used to draw pandas in the answer columns.”

“You really just gave up on it entirely!”

“Look, my panda drawings were really good, okay? Maybe I should have been an artist instead?”

“You should apologize to all the artists of the world for saying that! Take this seriously! You really won’t get into college at this rate, will you…?”

“Don’t worry. If it comes down to it, I’ll use my privileges as daughter of the emperor and force them to let me in.”

“You really plan on getting in through the back door, huh?”

Her thinking was much worse than he had imagined.

“Ryouta, whether the door is the front or back is not important. All that matters is whether or not I put the effort into getting into college.”

“Don’t put your efforts into committing fraud, then! I’m serious! I’ll get upset for real!”

“I guess I’ll be a high school graduate, at least…”

“So you really have zero intention to do any work! You know, I’m worried you won’t be able to graduate high school!”

“……To tell the truth, I might not be able to graduate.”

This seemed genuinely grave, and Ryouta was at a loss for what to say.

“*Sigh*, even this conversation is just the same as always, isn’t it?”

“Well, I could have sworn I heard something pretty dire in there, but… Whatever, I’ll just ignore that for now, yeah…”

Shiren was lounging around, her arms stretched out.

"That's right. That's what a daily routine is. It's exhausting when there's too much change. See, maybe it's hard to experience it here in the Sacred Blood Empire, but people get tired when they travel. Even though you're just sitting there on a train or an airplane, it saps your energy. I think it's because just going somewhere unfamiliar takes a lot out of you."

"Now that you mention it, you almost died when you went up that mountain with Sasara… Travel is a terrifying thing…"

"Well, no, that was because I was fighting… That's totally different…"

It wasn't like he was having life-and-death sword battles on every trip he went on.

"I really wish my mother wasn't coming," Shiren whispered. "Things are fine, and she has no right to be my mother if she's just going to come and mess all that up. I've finally found ways to enjoy life without her. She's too late. She's way too late…," she mumbled to herself, her head drooped to the floor.

Indeed—Shiren had had it tough these past few years, all because of her mother.

It was hard for her as an ordinary citizen, which was her legal status. But it was also hard for her as the daughter of the human who'd killed the emperor.

Even though she was an "ordinary" citizen, she had still been dropped from the royal family—a humiliating demotion. Despite everything, she was supposed to be a princess, and all her privileges had been taken away from her.

Even though she had done nothing wrong.

And so though Ryouta didn't know what kind of parting they'd had, he understood well why Shiren would hate Sairi Fuyukura so much. Maybe without that hatred, she wouldn't have been able to keep herself going.

But…

"Shiren, I'm the only one here. You don't have to force yourself to badmouth your mom."

Ryouta also knew it couldn't be that straightforward for Shiren.

This was about parent and child. Even Ryouta would one day have to return to see his mother, still affected by his curse, even if that time was far in the future.

“What? Why, does it look like I’m forcing myself?” Shiren huffed, staring hard at him.

“Not all your memories with her are bad, right? She was still your mom way before the incident happened.”

Shiren’s shoulders shook slightly.

Of the many things he’d heard about Sairi so far, they all had one thing in common.

None of them were before the incident.

Almost as if time itself had begun when her father was tragically murdered.

“O-obviously… No matter how much I hate her, I still have a lot of fun memories of her… Going on picnics with her, begging her for a toy until she bought it for me, being comforted by her after I fell and started crying… I know it’s all cliché, but I have memories like those, too… It’d be weirder if I didn’t…”

She did have them, after all.

Warm memories of parent and child.

“I especially remember the festivals. She’d buy me cotton candy, but she’d end up eating seventy percent of it. And she’d eat seventy percent of my *okonomiyaki*, too. She’d say the caramel apples were too big for me, so she’d eat seventy percent of them. Then she would say that I’d get brain freeze if I ate all the shaved ice, so she’d eat seventy percent of that, too…”

“Your mom sure is a glutton!”

“But it was nice having her buy so much stuff for me.”

“Of course, of course.”

“It traumatized me when she ate my goldfish, though.”

“What an absurd thing to do to your kid!”

“She said it was discrimination that we eat salmon and tuna but not goldfish.”

“That’s some extreme logic there!”

“But I have so many memories. Lady Ominaeshi was Dad’s legal wife, so he couldn’t just dote on me all the time; I remember he always looked so conflicted. I think he thought he’d be in trouble if he paid too much attention to the child of a consort. So in comparison, I have a lot more memories of my mom.”

“See, that’s why you shouldn’t have to force yourself.”

“No. That’s exactly why I can never forgive her!” A hint of a sob crept into Shiren’s voice. “She was my dearest, most beloved mother, and then one day, she suddenly…she suddenly disappeared. She didn’t tell me anything, obviously. How could she? She didn’t even say good-bye.”

She must be remembering the day it happened.

The day she had lost everything.

“It’s like yesterday in my mind. I could never forget it. There was a commotion in the house. A voice came from Mom’s room saying that Dad had been killed, and then came another yell that Mom was gone. They didn’t let me into her room, and they didn’t even let me see the body…”

Ryouta was at a loss for words, too.

There was nothing he could say to comfort her.

There was nothing to say except how horrible it all was. No, it was even worse than horrible.

And it had suddenly barged its way into the life of an impressionable teen girl.

“For a time, they shut me away in my room. They treated it like it was for my own safety, but in reality, they were conducting an investigation. They kept asking me if my mom had ever said anything that might suggest she planned to murder the emperor, or if she ever told me that she was a spy—they asked me the same things over and over again.”

Rather than sympathizing with Shiren after she’d lost everything, they were treating her like a suspect.

Of course they were. The emperor had been killed right before the Sacred Blooded revolution, and in Sairi’s room—a member of the Virginal Father. Of course suspicion would fall on her daughter, the one who was closest to Sairi besides the emperor himself.

“I cried as I told them so many times, she would never, how could I have known? I said there was no kid on Earth who would stand by and let their father be killed if they knew it was going to happen. If I really were her accomplice, I would have been long gone by then—I wouldn’t have stayed. My mind was blank, but I somehow managed to be logical. I was desperate, because I knew if they deemed me a coconspirator, they would probably kill me…”

“Ugh…”

Just listening to her almost brought Ryouta to tears, too.

This was awful.

Shiren hadn't even been given space to grieve her parent.

All she could do was plead her own innocence so that she wouldn't be suspected. That in itself must have felt like an unbelievable disgrace to her, considering she had been brought up as a princess. In one day, she had suddenly been made a suspect in a murder.

"I said, I am a proud Sacred Blooded, I have the blood of the emperor in my veins. It is unthinkable I would ever assist in the dealings of a foolish cult…" Shiren's sobs briefly cut off her words. "Luckily, Big Sis helped me out… She said there was no definitive proof that Sairi was the culprit. In fact, since she had been with the emperor for over ten years, we should also consider the possibility that she was kidnapped as a traitor by the Virginal Father. She told them to stop with the pointless interrogation."

"I see, Ouka saved you…"

Ryouta felt sincere relief knowing Shiren had had even the slightest bit of help.

"But it was really unlikely that other members of the Virginal Father had been able to infiltrate, so it became official opinion that Sairi had killed the emperor. I was removed from the Sarano family. You know the rest, right?"

Shiren's face was twisted in pain.

"Yeah, I know…"

"I only wish she'd said something before leaving…" It was a bitter regret. "I wish she'd told me that she only bore me to get close to the emperor, or that she never loved me. Anything like that. I'd have felt refreshed. Then I could have found something else to keep me going…"

Not even Ryouta could say he understood how that felt.

"But I only learned about the incident after the fact…" Shiren's shoulders shuddered. "I didn't know, so I…I…could only wait… Are things supposed to be this painful? Are things supposed to be this unfair?"

Shiren most likely cursed not only her mother, but also her own fate. After what she'd gone through, anyone would have done the same.

"And now she's suddenly inviting me to live with her in Japan…? She's so selfish… Of course I don't know how to answer… And I've started a new life here on my own, too…"

"Yeah… It was so shockingly sudden…"

"If only she'd told me before you showed up… Then it would have been

easy…”

“Ah…”

Before Ryouta came, Shiren didn’t have Ouka’s pardon. She was treated terribly; it wasn’t overt discrimination, but she didn’t have many friends and was basically all alone.

Had this all come to light then, she probably would have chosen to go with Sairi in a heartbeat.

It was better to be in Japan with her mother than in a country where she had no one.

But now things were different for Shiren. She had made so many ties here in the Empire.

“If I have to be honest, I…haven’t made up my mind yet. I think I could refuse her even if she came to see me. But…I won’t know until that happens…”

Even though she had declared that going back was unthinkable, the will in her words was fading.

But that’s normal. Whose resolve wouldn’t waver?

If she turned Sairi down, there was no guarantee of a second chance. She didn’t know where her mother was staying, after all. And if Sairi gave up on her, then they might never have the chance to make contact again.

But despite the uncertainty, Shiren would still have to make a decision when the time came.

If she froze in place, unable to decide between *stay* or *go*, then the choice to stay would be made for her. There was no way to put off the decision.

“Sorry… This is all my fault. I really didn’t understand how you felt. You’re right, there’s no way it could be that easy…”

He had tried to assess what was going on in front of him based on the assumption that every parent and child would love each other. It was so stupid.

What she had here in the Empire was precious, irreplaceable. Choosing one meant discarding the other.

“You don’t have to apologize. You’re doing well, Ryouta. If you knew my feelings inside and out, that would make me much more uncomfortable. You’d be a psychic.” Shiren grabbed tightly on to Ryouta’s hand. “You’re so thoughtful when you speak to your master, and you apologize

immediately when you think you've made a mistake. You're a model minion."

"Th-thanks…"

"I'm glad you're my minion, Ryouta."

"Your *provisional* minion."

"I don't want you to be provisional. I don't want you to be anyone else's." She tightened her grip. "Let me drink your blood." But her hand was shaking. "…Even if you are provisional, you still have to obey your master's orders."

"Yes, of course, Master."

Ryouta bent down a little for her. Maybe things would be a lot easier if he actually was her minion, he thought. He felt he was causing problems for a lot of people by leaving everything so ambiguous.

"I'll try not to hurt you…"

"Idiot. This stuff hurts. Don't worry about it, though. I'll make it through."

"You haven't put wasabi on yourself, have you?"

"No, I haven't. Come on, do it. This position is making me tired."

"Very well…"

He couldn't see her face anymore. But he didn't need to see her to know what she looked like. They had done this so many times, but she still looked embarrassed every time as she tried to suck his blood.

He decided not to ask her why she was always so embarrassed about it, even though she wanted to do it.

Not everything was so simple and clear-cut. Just like the relationship between parent and child.

"Haum…"

There was a piercing pain, like getting a shot. He could stand it, but he probably wouldn't ever get used to it. It was a new sensation every time it happened.

At least the paralyzing effect would eventually kick in.

The Sacred Blooded probably evolved this trait so the humans they made their minions wouldn't resist.

But it didn't make him very happy, because the paralysis could make him forget about everything, even Shiren, for a brief time. The effect made his consciousness hazy, even obscuring the things right in front of him. All

that would be left for him was a pleasant feeling.

I'd be a failure of a minion.

He had to accept this pain as something that belonged to Shiren.

She was the one biting him, after all, and her heart was in pain, too.

"Haugh… Hmm…"

Ahhh, I know this feeling… It's similar to when Alfoncina bit me…

Shiren must be growing up.

It'd been said before that she couldn't make complete minions because she was half human, but Ryouta wasn't so sure.

She was maturing.

And that was why Ryouta would stay in the Empire and be Shiren's minion.

He would live for her.

That wouldn't be so bad. There was something more captivating about it than living entirely for himself.

If I became her complete minion now, then I'm sure she'd stay here in the Empire.

It was practically impossible for Ryouta to lead a normal life in Japan. If Shiren managed to make him her minion, then she would probably agree to stay for him as well.

In other words, she was biting him to deepen her roots here.

Please, please succeed, Master…

But Ryouta had the feeling they would be interrupted—there were still things keeping them apart.

Ohhh nooo~ This is baaad~ Very baaad~♪ Really bad, if you know what I mean~♪ So bad~♪

"What's this stupid music…?"

A melody Ryouta didn't know echoed throughout the castle grounds.

I'm not singing to advertise baked sweet potatoes~ I'm not advertising bamboo poles~ I'm not advertising *warabi-mochi*~ I'm not a ramen truck~ I'm not collecting waste, either~ What, oh, what could

I be~? ♪

"Tell us already!"

I'm a siren! This is baaad~♪ This is so very baaad~♪

"Lead with the siren part! Stop listing things that you're not!"

The Virginal Father might be attacking~♪ This is baaad~♪ Don't panic, at least not too quickly~♪

"Tell us how to evacuate! Panicking will help no one!"

It's fine, it's not a problem~♪

"Prove that it's fine! It definitely isn't! We're kind of in danger here!"

Our enemy today doesn't seem interested in average civilians~♪ So we'll probably be fine~♪

"So that's what they meant. But we're not average civilians, are we?"

If anything, Shiren was the main target.

"Let's go to the evacuation shelter in the castle, Ryouta. We should still be able to make it if we go now."

"Yeah. We should go while we have the chance. You should be safe there. No—" He couldn't pretend this wasn't personal. "*I'll* keep you safe."

He grinned and took Shiren's hand.

"Th-thank you…" Her face went red in response. "But it kind of scares me when you say that…"

"What do you mean?"

"When a character smiles confidently, it usually spells disaster…"

"Don't point that out."

He was well aware of the danger. He had toed the line of death countless times since coming to the Empire.

But he already knew what he was capable of and what path he needed to take.

“Get ready. I’ll get the most important thing.”

“What?”

When he came back, he held his sword in his hand. “*Noblesse oblige*, was it? I’ll fight to protect you, Master.”

“Thank you. Keep me safe…from Sairi.”

Ryouta would fight, trusting that she was telling the truth. “Yes. I’ll do exactly as you wish, Master.”

Ryouta grasped Shiren’s hand again. This time, he held it much tighter.

“Let’s go, Master.”

She squeezed his hand in return.

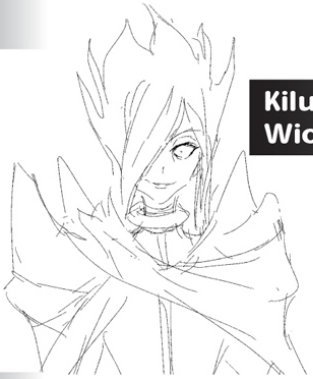
“Serve me well, Ryouta.”

THE MAGNIFICENT FOURTEEN

Asuka the Multitudinous

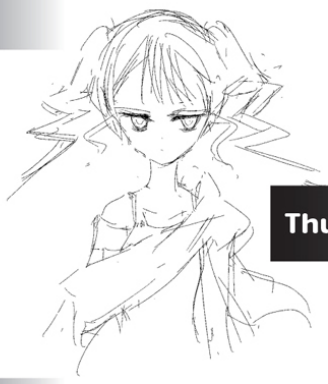
Matilda the Haze

Mega the Malodorous



Kilue the Wicked

Selea the Savage Moth



Thunder Lirulu

Flameblood Garda

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EPISODE 5

LET'S PROTECT SHIREN FROM THE ENEMY!

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EPISODE 5

LET'S PROTECT SHIREN FROM THE ENEMY!

It didn't take long for them to get into the castle.

Ryouta was glad neither of them had been bathing at the time. Because of that, they were able to get moving right away.

Ouka was waiting for them at the castle.

"You made good time," she said. "I was sure you would take too long trying to find your bankbook and wind up late."

"Well, it's not a fire, so that wasn't a priority."

"And you don't have enough savings to worry about theft anyway."

"That's true, but you still don't need to say it out loud! We may be commoners, but we're getting by!"

"We'll be going to the emergency evacuation shelter—my mother's room—now. I'll be hiding there, too."

Ouka started moving away as she spoke. She probably went to Ominaeshi's room often; her movements were smooth and confident.

Meanwhile, the rest of the castle was in an uproar; people running about the halls caught Ryouta's eye. He'd never really paid any mind to it before, but there were indeed a lot of people working in the castle.

There were soldiers wearing armor that looked like it came out of the Middle Ages, and still others in modern military uniforms, all going this way and that. Ryouta thought again how jumbled up this country's institutions were. Nonetheless, everyone present had an equally tense expression.

"Any information on the enemy, Ouka?"

"A group of fifteen from the Virginal Father have crossed the mountains and infiltrated the Empire, with Sairi Fuyukura at the center. But there's only fifteen of them. That's too little to decimate an entire country, even a small one."

"That's right. Even an elite corps can only do so much."

“That means their objective must be limited to the country’s backbone: us. If we can evade them, then we’ll win this game of tag. There’s room for us to win. More than enough.”

First, they went down to the second basement level.

After passing through the storage rooms, they came to the bathroom that led farther down.

This time when they knocked, the automated voice said, “I’m sorry, I have diarrhea, so this might take a while…”

“That’s kinda gross…,” Ryouta remarked.

“But it’s better than the previous version! Be grateful we improved it!”

Standing in the center of the long hallway was a group of female soldiers.

When they noticed Ouka, they all bowed deeply in unison.

“Ahh… They’re the Imperial Guard…”

“Precisely. The Guard stays by my side to protect me, so they’re all women—except you, Ryouta.”

“I noticed that. It makes me feel a little inferior, though…”

“This will be the next to last line of defense. The guards are to completely cut off this corridor.”

There was one familiar face missing, however.

“Huh? Where’s Sasara?”

“She’s here. She’s farther in, on the last line of defense. That’s where you’ll be, Ryouta.”

“Can I even fulfill such an important post…?”

Even though he knew he couldn’t be weak-willed here, he still shrunk back in the face of such heavy responsibility.

“To be honest, I don’t really expect that much from you.”

“Your honesty is pretty harsh…”

“But you’re needed to strengthen Sasara. You understand what I mean, don’t you, Shiren?”

A look of empathy for Sasara crossed Shiren’s face.

“You’re awful, Big Sis.”

“Don’t insult someone who shares half your blood, my foolish sister.”

Ryouta felt Ouka had specifically chosen to use the word *sister*.

“Follow me, bearing in mind that you are the sister of the emperor. I will not be pleased if you act shamefully.”

“I would be more than happy to, Big Sis.”

The two sisters grinned at each other.

The sturdy door—which might as well have been a wall—was already open.

Inside, Sasara was waiting.

She was dressed in her knight’s gear, of course, and fully armed.

“I have been waiting for you. Never fear, Lady Ouka, I shall not allow a single ant to pass this point.”

“And that is exactly what I hoped for when I gave you this assignment. Ryouta, you hold the line here with Sasara.”

“Got it. I’ll do what I can. I mean, I’m hoping that won’t be necessary, though.”

“Rei, by the way, is in charge of surveillance in case the enemy retreats, and Toraha is leading the citywide defenses.”

“Where’s Alfoncina?” Ryouta asked.

“The First Cathedral is kind of like a dungeon, so she said that anyone who wanted to get at her was welcome to try. Besides, the archbishop can’t abandon the cathedral.”

“Does she have security? She’s important, so she might be a target…”

“No need to worry. She’s powerful enough on her own, so she’ll be all right. And considering the size of the group, they aren’t likely to divide their forces.”

Indeed—if the small group of fifteen were to split up, they would be easier to pick off.

“Well then, I guess I’m off, Ryouta…,” Shiren said.

“Yeah. Take it easy, okay?”

As they parted, they looked into each other’s eyes. This wasn’t the time for long conversation. A few words were enough.

“Ryouta, Sasara. Fight well, but don’t try to earn any posthumous promotions.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice, Your Majesty.”

“I would never die and leave you alone in this world, Lady Ouka. No need to worry,” Sasara said, her smile carefree. “If it comes to that, I will beg for my life in the hopes of seeing you again.”

“I would prefer if you fought like an Imperial guard in that case, but… Sure, fine… Okay…”

“You two go on, then! Let’s make this quick!”

“Yes! And don’t die, even if you’re killed!”

But just before they parted, Ouka’s phone rang.

“Hello, this is the emperor. Oh, I see. I kind of got that feeling anyway. Mm-hmm.” She chatted casually with the person on the other end.

“What was that about?”

“Apparently, the Virginal Father never had any intention of fighting. It sounds like their main mission was to make sure Sairi Fuyukura got into the country. They’re at the convenience store now.”

“You don’t think…?” Ryouta wondered.

“Shijou’s shop, I hear,” said Ouka.

“I hope Shijou will be okay…”

“Please be safe, Tamaki…”

Both Ryouta and Shiren looked uneasy.

“Oh, okay. Uh-huh. Why is that? I see. I’m hanging up now.” Ouka ended the conversation.

“Is Tamaki okay, Big Sis?!”

“Apparently, they all went red the moment they entered the shop and then ran out because they’re only selling porn.”

““The *Kairakuten*!””

Shiren and Ryouta yelled in harmony.

“What on Earth is that store doing…? This is no time to be messing around…” Ouka cleared her throat and got the conversation back on track. “So that means Sairi Fuyukura is heading here by herself. It seems she seriously plans to take on all of us alone. She must think this is a game.”

The woman certainly had a lot of confidence in her abilities. But of course she did—she was the current head of the Virginal Father.

“We’re going for real now, you two.”

Shiren looked silently at Ryouta and Sasara.

“And, Sasara, if all ends well, I’ll be issuing a ticket to Toraha allowing him to kiss you or whatever else for one whole day.”

“That is way over the line!”

“But first, you need to concentrate on your enemy. Good-bye.”

Ouka took Shiren’s hand and ran off.

Ryouta's and Sasara's only task now was to wait for their enemy.

They had been left alone in the cold, empty corridor.

The thick door stood locked in front of them.

The lock could be set using a combination of twelve numbers and letters, so of course Ryouta had used all twelve spaces.

He prayed that the door would never open.

"So Sairi has finally arrived."

Ominaeshi was already awake, sitting on her coffin like a chair.

"Will it be a heartfelt reunion, or something else? Either way, I do not particularly want to see her. Nor do I want to hear her voice, or even her footsteps."

"That reminds me—you were never on good terms with Sairi Fuyukura, were you, Mother?"

Ouka sat down beside Ominaeshi, but Shiren decided to stay opposite the coffin.

"No. She is the person I hate the second most in this world. It might even be fun to settle our dispute, here and now, once and for all. Oh-ho-ho." Ominaeshi chuckled like a vampire again. "Shiren, deary. How do you feel, knowing your mother is paying you a well-overdue visit?"

Ominaeshi commanded the space, of course, as she was the oldest woman here and owner of the room.

"Annoyed… I can live a perfectly good life without her around."

"Then tell her how annoyed you are. Stick your tongue out at her; perhaps insult her using words banned from broadcast television. That will surely make you feel better."

Ominaeshi was the only one who seemed at ease.

Ouka sat quietly, but her expression betrayed mixed feelings.

"You see," Ominaeshi went on, "a child has the right to stand up against her parents. There is merit in pushing them to tears. The only question is whether or not you will make use of your rights. That is truly it."

"Mother? May I ask you a question?" Ouka turned to the woman beside her. "Is the person you hate the most in the world my father?"

Ominaeshi's eyebrow twitched.

"Yes, and?"

“Why is that? You may be Sacred Blooded, but wasn’t yours a love match?”

“Yes, we were so in love. When we were around your age, we did many things together that cannot be described in a teen novel. Oh-ho, they were lustful and raunchy days. Would you like to hear the spicy details?”

“No, thank you. I’m not in the mood for smut.”

“Oh, whenever he took off my bra, he would—”

“I told you, no!”

“Sometimes, I would ride the train without wearing underwear—”

“I already said no! You’re in your thirties already; please have a little more restraint!”

“Aww. A life without dirty talk is like *char siu* ramen without the *char siu*…” Ominaeshi chewed her nails, looking surprisingly disappointed. “And you are not allowed to say the word *thirties*. I am forever seventeen—”

“And stop trying to avoid the question with all this nonsense. Why do you hate Father the most?”

“Obviously, it’s because in the end, he chose Sairi over me.”

Ominaeshi sulked like a child.

“I was so certain that I was the one he loved most in this world. I understood that as emperor, he was bound to have another woman, a lover or second wife. It was not just about love, but the survival of our country.” A tired look crossed her face. “Although apart from that, he was still such a womanizer, he would seduce anyone… I’m sure he’s making moves on a new woman even in Asgard, land of the gods…”

“That’s just the sort of person Father was.”

Ouka sympathized with her, seeming to know what she was talking about.

“Despite that…” Ominaeshi turned to Shiren sitting opposite her. “I was supposed to be his number one. I believed that was the only possibility that existed for us, even if heaven and Earth were turned on their heads. And he betrayed me spectacularly. So of course I hate him.”

As Ominaeshi stared at her, Shiren felt like she had become Sairi, that

she had lived her life. “Lady Ominaeshi, if I recall, Father was shot with a gun, wasn’t he?”

“That is what they say. It is most likely true.”

“Does that mean he allowed Sairi to shoot him because he loved her, even though she was a member of the Virginal Father?”

The truth of the incident was still shrouded in darkness.

All they knew was that the emperor had been shot, and Sairi, who was discovered to have been a spy for the Virginal Father, vanished.

That was the only reason for Ominaeshi’s hate that Shiren could think of.

“This is the first time you have asked such a thing, Shiren.”

“You may be right…”

Maybe she should have confirmed it earlier.

But Shiren had never had the courage. She had never even had the courage to come to see Ominaeshi. She was too sensitive to the possibility that Ominaeshi hated her.

“Your guess is incorrect. It is my disgrace as well, so I do not wish to say more.”

Ominaeshi turned her gaze toward the floor, as though she’d recalled something awful. Her various accessories clinked together with the movement.

“But, Shiren. Ouka. There is one thing I’d like to say to you,” she said, a villainous smile on her face—even though the expression seemed particularly forced.

In truth, there was nothing funny about it at all.

“A man can only choose one woman. Just as a woman can only choose one man.” A quiet chuckle slipped from her lips. “That is why when you love the same man as another, all that awaits you is tragedy. You will find yourself trapped by despair, as though you will never again bask in the sun’s rays. Even though it is naught but one of the many forms love can take. Oh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ho-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ho-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ho-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha… Ha…ha-ha… Ha-ha… Ah… Wah…”

Ominaeshi’s loud laughter soon dissolved into sobs as emotion overwhelmed her.

She covered her face with both hands and cried.

“Lady Ominaeshi, is the real reason you hate the sun and hide yourself in here…?”

“When Ouen died, it was as though I died with him. That is why I remain here in this coffin. I have no intentions of going back up to the surface.”

Her exhausted face made her seem so much like Ouka, they practically looked like sisters.

And that was exactly why Shiren felt so uncomfortable about all this. She had the feeling a similar misfortune might befall her own sister and herself.

“As the oldest here, and one who has tasted tragedy, let me give you a word of warning… If you will be driven to despair, then it is better to give up now. Even Sairi and I, who have no blood connection, came to hate each other so much…” Ominaeshi was stumbling over her words but managed to continue. “To make matters worse, you two are sisters. You’ve come so far to make amends, and to think you will only end up hating each other… That is much more painful than giving up on just one man… It truly, truly is…”

She gazed up at the gothic-style ceiling, full of eerie monster carvings trailing down the walls and pillars.

Her little room was a bit like her own personal hell.

“Please calm down, Mother…”

Ouka sensed trouble brewing and tried to stop Ominaeshi.

“Allow me to be frank. There is only one Ryouta Asagiri in this world. One of you must stand down. Or both of you must.” Ominaeshi brought up a certain name. “You will be destroyed if you try to take him from each other. Just like us.” She gave them a warning, born from her own failure. “You are horribly mistaken if you think peace will come once you beat back Sairi. The fight does not stop there. It will go on for a long, long time.”

Shiren and Ouka turned to face each other at practically the same time.

Their eyes locked.

“I—”

Ouka made the first move.

“—love Ryouta.”

All Shiren could do was gaze weakly at Ouka.

“I’ve been holding back all this time because I’m the emperor, but I’m

not going to do that anymore. I've liked him ever since elementary school, okay! And then I miraculously get to see him again, so why should I have to stay quiet?!" Ouka yelled, getting emotional. She had completely forgotten about her own grace as emperor. Well, perhaps she was still aware of it but decided to ignore it instead.

She didn't need that right now.

She could be selfish.

"That's why I'm going to make Ryouta my minion, even if it means using my power as emperor. Then we can go back to the way we were meant to be."

"That…doesn't matter…," Shiren said, her head drooped.

"What, do you have something to say?"

"I do!" She glared at Ouka. "Sure, you may have liked him for a long time, but Ryouta's my minion now! You've never lived with him, not even for a single day!"

She knew that if she backed down here, it would all be over.

That was why she could not stay silent.

If she did, she would be doing a disservice to herself—and especially to Ryouta.

"And that was all because I showed you compassion! You still haven't made him your minion yet, so give him to me!"

"Then you never should have showed me that compassion! If you'd really loved him, you wouldn't have done that!"

For a moment, Ouka lost the words to argue back.

Bull's-eye.

If she had told Ryouta that she loved him and asked him to be her minion right from the start, then she wouldn't have constantly been one step behind.

"We're not going to get anywhere like this. We can't even make a majority decision when it's you against me," Ouka said with a calm face. "So let's ask Ryouta when he gets here. That should make this quick."

Shiren's face clouded over at Ouka's words.

That was because she knew—Ryouta's first love was Ouka.

Meanwhile, a little way in front of the evacuation shelter, Ryouta and

Sasara stood together.

“Now that I think about it, we have fought many times, but this may be the first time we fight a common enemy together,” Sasara said, a joking tone in her voice.

But her eyes were dark—the eyes of a soldier quietly waiting for battle.

“Really? Oh, but what about the thing with Toraha?”

“I would not call that fighting together. At any rate, I would say I have fought against you more than aided you.”

“Yeah. We even tried to kill each other. When I think about how recently that was, it feels kind of weird.”

“Th-this p-pair work is not such a bad idea…”

“Why are you blushing?”

“Do not ask me. If I answer, it will only bring unnecessary trouble. Right now, we must first concentrate on fulfilling our duties as Imperial Guard.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

Back when Ouka first gave Ryouta this sword, he had felt more like he was borrowing it from a real soldier. Now it was more comfortable in his hands than ever.

“But it is unlikely that they will come this far in. The recently established Magnificent Fourteen of the Imperial Guard are waiting for them ahead of us, you see.”

“So including you in the Imperial Guard makes it fifteen, right? And with me, that makes sixteen… Does that mean you’re considered to be the strongest? Like, on a whole different level?”

“I was treated as a pervert and removed from the group after loudly screaming my love for Lady Ouka.”

“So you’ve been deemed a negative influence on society!”

“They do not invite me to the guard parties, either… Lady Ouka has the power of appointment, though, so I haven’t been fired yet.”

It sounded like she was being treated horribly.

“The fact that they’re called the Magnificent Fourteen makes them sound really strong. Even though I’m not that great, I’m still an Imperial guard. And don’t know any of them…”

“You’re such a slacker. Then I will use this time to tell you who they are,” Sasara said, exasperated. “The Magnificent Fourteen are Asuka the

Multitudinous, Matilda the Haze, Mega the Malodorous, Kilue the Wicked, Selea the Savage Moth, Thunder Lirulu, Flameblood Garda, Galeblade Kena, Prickler Iriael, Naru the Imaginary, Phillea the Cruel, Clear Ice Ilhue, Sarelil the Shatterer, and Leftover Filla."

"The last one sounds really weak!"

"The last one? Do you mean Leftover Filla?"

"Of course I mean that one! They sound like a total afterthought!"

"Leftover Filla used to play softball. Once, she was put on the field as a pinch hitter when her team had two outs, down ten points in the final inning."

"Exactly the entrance I would expect for a leftover filler! It's like, *Well, we've already lost. Let's just let her stand in the batter's box for once. Why not?*"

"She gave up on softball in high school and took up the sword instead."

"I guess that was the right decision in a way, but her nickname makes it sound like people really don't think anything of her!"

"My nickname, by the way, is Sasara the Pervert."

"That isn't a nickname; they're just calling you a pervert!"

"It just does not make sense. I am fifteen times more powerful than Leftover Filla…"

"Must suck being a leftover…"

"Marre the Rook was the weakest before she quit…"

"Sounds like she'd be better at chess!"

"She quit when she decided to be a professional chess player."

"The Imperial Guard is an important post! Stop hiring weirdos!"

Just then, Sasara's phone rang.

"What…? Impossible! Asuka the Multitudinous, Matilda the Haze, Mega the Malodorous, Kilue the Wicked, Selea the Savage Moth, Thunder Lirulu, Flameblood Garda, Galeblade Kena, Prickler Iriael, Naru the Imaginary, Phillea the Cruel, Clear Ice Ilhue, Sarelil the Shatterer, and the leftover have all been defeated by Sairi alone…?!"

"Sairi Fuyukura is way too strong! And at least call the leftover girl by her name! Why did you leave it out?!"

"Well, *leftover* and *filler* are pretty similar, so I believe just calling her by one of those words should be enough."

"Filla has to be her real name, though… Right? But now I've got the

feeling we're in for it!"

It was a bad sign to hear all their names in full a second time. The probability was high they were going to be out of commission without even getting any screen time.

"She took them out one by one, and when Leftover Filla stepped in last, she was struck down in a single blow."

"She didn't get to do anything!"

"Filla apparently yelled, 'I'm more than enough to take her on! Everyone else, go on ahead!'"

"She definitely wasn't enough! And we're not the ones who need to let teammates ahead! We're the ones stopping them from coming!"

"The phone call was from Filla, by the way, and considering she hung up in the middle, I believe she may be exaggerating. I doubt she got to yell anything at all. She is a filler character, after all."

"This is a weird time to be reminded of the harshness of society, but here we are…"

Events were now unfolding toward the worst possible outcome.

"If Sairi breaks down this door, then we will clash with her head-on. Luckily, no one besides her is coming."

Indeed—if they could manage this one woman somehow, then they would emerge victorious.

"Hey, Sasara? Be honest, how much of a chance of winning do you think we have?"

"You ask for honesty, and you shall receive. Considering how she took down the Magnificent Fourteen, we do not stand a chance. I suppose it would be a different story if she was already severely wounded, however," she said, a fragile smile across her face.

"Right. If you think we don't have a chance, then I don't know how much I'll be able to manage… I'll do what I can not to get in the way."

He wouldn't let shaky knees root him in place. He had managed to avoid death thus far, and if his enemy wasn't out for blood, then he could probably survive the ordeal.

That said, it pained him to think that he wouldn't be able to carry out his duty.

No—even if he was able to stop Sairi, should he?

Even though she was an intruder, she was still Shiren's mother on her

way to see her daughter.

Maybe we should just step out of the way and let her through…? No! I'd be betraying all of them if I did that.

Ryouta crushed the tiny hint of doubt.

"But even if I do get in the way, I'll do what I can to fight."

"There's no need to worry. You will never get in the way," Sasara declared, her tone confident.

"How do you know that?"

"Because so long as you are here, I am three times more powerful than I usually am."

"Three times? Ouka said the same thing, I think you're fudging the numbers—"

"Certainly not. In fact, it may be even more than three times."

Ryouta wasn't really clear on what she meant.

Then all of a sudden…she embraced him.

Well, it wasn't much of an embrace; she mostly just wrapped her arms around him in a light hug.

"Sa…sara?"

"Lady Ouka is too cruel. Though, I cannot tell if it is for her own victory or if she really did spare a thought for me."

"Hey, Sasara? What do you…?"

"I apologize if I am causing you confusion. But this will give me even greater power, so please let it slide."

She let him go.

But she was already looking toward the door.

"Ryouta Fuyukura, it is truly an honor to fight by your side."

"Th-thanks…"

"I would like to fight alongside you as long as I live, but I fear that is asking for too much.

"You're right, as long as we can both stay alive, we can fight together another day."

"*Sigh…* That thick head of yours truly enrages me." Sasara huffed. "Though, it would cause me problems if you were more perceptive." She broke into a smile.

"By the way, Sasara, do you think Sairi can get through that door?"

"I will bet a hundred thousand sacred yen that she can."

“Then it isn’t really a bet. I don’t think it’s going to do much to stop her, either.”

As they spoke, that very door split right in two.

Despite being so thick, it was practically a wall, it had been sliced like warm butter—and it was cut so cleanly that barely any pieces broke off from either half.

The side of the door that slid toward Sasara and Ryouta fell onto the ground and opened a pathway.

And from behind the door appeared a woman, holding a sword with a dragon design wrapping around it.

For a split second when she first came into view, Ryouta considered how much she looked like Shiren. Of course she did—they were mother and child.

Her hair was shorter than Shiren’s—which was absurdly long anyway—but it could easily reach her lower back.

For how powerful she was, her expression felt much softer than Shiren’s.

“No offense, but these walls are way too shabby for an emperor’s hideout. You don’t even need to know the passcode. You can just cut your way through.”

“You’re Sairi Fuyukura…”

“I am. I’d always planned to assault the castle on my own; bringing my people would just result in casualties on both sides. That’s why I thought it’d be more convenient for all of us if there was a big power gap.”

“It has been quite a while, Lady Sairi. I did not think you would become this powerful.”

This was the first time Sasara had seen Sairi in two years as well, though this time, they met as enemies.

“It has been a while. But you’re wrong on the second point. I was just pretending to be a little weakling when I lived in the Empire. As a result, I’m a bit rusty compared with my prime.”

Ryouta wished she were joking, but he could tell by the air around her that she had far surpassed the boundaries of any normal person.

“Two years. Wow—it’s felt so much longer than that. But everything’s finally ready, so it was time for me to stop by.”

Sasara quietly readied her sword.

Ryouta followed suit.

“Pardon me, but no one here is ready to see you. I will keep the property damage a secret, so please be gone.”

“So sorry, but I’m sure you two realize you won’t even slow me down, right? Though I suppose if people could be persuaded with reason, we wouldn’t have wars, huh?”

“Exactly!” Sasara moved first, dashing toward Sairi.

But Sairi responded without pause, and her training was clearly advanced. Though she was likely many years older than Sasara, her age had not dulled her abilities at all. Even her looks were eerily young.

The sound of clashing metal echoed through the corridor.

It was a horrible noise, tearing at Ryouta’s nerves with every reverberation.

They were so much more advanced than him that Ryouta didn’t have much of a chance to join in.

If he was off by just one second, he would certainly be killed.

“Wow, you’ve gotten a lot stronger, Sasara. I now see why you were placed here, after all the other guards.”

“I am honored to receive such a compliment.”

“To be honest, I thought Leftover Losa was going to be the last one.”

“Her name is Filla, not Losa! You have her name wrong!”

“Oh, it’s basically the same. Still means she’s weak.”

“That’s the joke! Leave her be!”

Leftover Filla was getting ripped to shreds on the gossip circuit.

“There are times when a knight cannot afford lose! For me, that moment is now!”

“Yes, I can’t disagree with that as someone who also wields a sword. But I can’t lose, either…because I need to see my daughter.”

The charged atmosphere around them practically exploded.

Sasara had only blocked Sairi’s sword with her own, but she was blown across the room and slammed hard into the wall.

“Aaaah!”

“Sasara!!”

As Ryouta stepped in to help, he suddenly blacked out.

He had been thrown back, too. It was hard to tell when, but Sairi had struck him in a brief opening of weakness, one he wasn’t even aware of.

The next thing he knew, he had fallen over and was crawling along the ground. He couldn't even feel his own pain.

"I don't know you, but since you are here and holding a sword, you are my enemy. You'll eventually be able to stand again, so stay down for now."

She's so powerful… She destroyed me in just a split second… I can't even move—it's like I'm asleep…

This was so far beyond anything he could comprehend. Masatsuna Toraha couldn't compare. Ryouta couldn't even lift his sword. He had no time to steel himself.

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“Unfortunately, sometimes a warrior is vastly outmatched. A knight from a puny micronation has nothing on me.” Sairi sheathed her sword. To her, it was all over. “But that’s nothing to be ashamed of. You’re still growing. You might surpass me one day. I think you could get there, after you stare death in the face for the fiftieth time, maybe?”

Slowly, but with confidence, Sairi made her way toward her destination.

There was no one left to stop her. She seemed sure of it.

“I cannot surpass you in the future… It has to be now…” Sasara groaned. Her voice stopped Sairi in her tracks. “I am not finished yet…”

Sasara staggered to her feet. There was no strength in her; she looked like a wraith.

“There’s no point in pushing yourself. I’m not here to kill anyone.’

“I was stationed here because I am expected to win… And I respect Lady Ouka’s keen judgment…” Sasara steadily made her way toward Ryouta. “I hope you don’t mind, Ryouta Fuyukura…but I need your blood.”

“Huh…? I don’t mind, sure…”

The Sacred Blooded gained special power when they drank the blood of a loved one.

“Maybe, just maybe, this will make me stronger… *Ahm*.”

Sasara gently sunk her teeth into Ryouta’s arm, then ripped into his flesh in a brisk motion.

There was zero time to be careful about her technique. She needed her results, even if it was rough.

All their efforts would be for nothing if she didn’t do this.

Ryouta’s blood would go to waste!

“Rgh…”

Ryouta gritted his teeth against the pain. It wasn’t like he was going to become superhuman, so this was the only road to victory left to them.

But there’s no way that Sasara likes me…

“I’m ready.”

The air around them had clearly changed.

It felt like a big storm had just passed through the corridor.

“Your blood was delicious, Ryouta Fuyukura. So much so, I would like to make you my minion and drink it every day.” Sasara stood, her steps different than they had been moments before.

Her eyes had taken on a new hue of jewellike red and blue swirls.

It did not take a seasoned veteran to sense how things had changed.

It was so drastic that one could almost mistake Sasara for someone else entirely.

"Oh, I see, that's why you two are guarding this place as a set. Love holds great power, doesn't it? That was all just a warm-up." Sairi unsheathed her sword again.

"You may die if you don't take this seriously," Sasara warned.

"Yes, of course. I'm not an amateur, you know."

They both leaped at each other.

Ryouta, who could scarcely move, couldn't tell what was going on in the battle anymore.

All he could hear were the sound of swords clashing with the intent to kill.

Ahh… Maybe that three times *stuff wasn't a joke…*

Had she used this power in their first battle, he probably would have been killed before he even realized he was dead. At this point, it was difficult to tell if what he was seeing was even real swordsmanship.

But why was it so effective…? Does "love" have a broader definition than I thought…? Or wait, does Sasara…love…m—? Nah, that can't be.

He crushed that line of thought. This wasn't the time for it.

What he did know was that Sasara had crossed a line and gone into a fury, and Sairi was matching her.

Neither of them spoke. At this level, they couldn't afford to.

Even Sairi had stopped chatting. There was no time for her to open her mouth.

Their blades clashed with such impeccable timing that it was impossible for anyone or anything to come between them.

If either of them was off by the slightest movement, then one of them would die.

If an outsider got between them, the outsider would die.

But Ryouta could not remain on the sidelines.

He had to fight. He was an Imperial guard.

"I'm still a member of this Guard…the sixteenth…"

He somehow managed to stand. If nothing else, he was confident that he better than any of them at not knowing when to give up. So long as he was still alive, he would continue to resist.

But that was enough to make him a distraction in their midst.

Sasara's concentration wavered ever so slightly.

The relief that Ryouta had enough energy to stand slowed the time it took for her to send her power into her fingers.

She wasn't able to avoid the massive beast making contact with her.

"Ah—!"

Her sword went flying.

The match was over.

"Just don't die, okay?"

Sairi thrust toward her armor. She had relaxed enough to speak out loud, and that was why she didn't pierce Sasara's armor.

But it was enough to end their battle.

Sasara was slammed into the wall with such force that it shuddered the earth.

And this time, her energy was completely spent.

Her armor was covered in cracks like spiderwebs.

"S-so this is as far as I go… I am so sorry, Lady Ouka…"

"You were doing pretty well. But it's like this. Love is a difficult thing. It brings you to life, but it can also destroy you." Sairi smiled wryly, recalling the past. "It's just like back then."

She then turned to continue on her path.

"Wait, please… Wait…" Ryouta struggled to catch up to her, but it was all he could do to keep moving himself forward, using his sword as a crutch. On top of that, the blood he'd lost to Sasara had weakened him even further.

But he couldn't stop.

It was his fault that Sasara lost.

It was his fault that she was now far more wounded than him.

It was his fault if they couldn't keep Shiren safe.

Sairi watched him, evaluating him. She no longer needed to rush.

"I'm happy to wait, but you can't really do anything, can you? I can tell you're standing on your mental will alone. Oh, and you've been protecting Shiren with that willpower this whole time, haven't you? Thanks, Ryouta."

"Oh, so you knew…"

"When I saw you go through all that trouble to stand up, I could guess who you were. I've been checking in on your situation. Only a little bit, you

understand.” Sairi shifted her eyes ever so slightly in Ryouta’s direction, as though showing him the minimal amount of respect. “That’s a good expression on you. You have the resolve needed to protect someone.”

“But resolve isn’t enough…”

“You’re right. Heart is all you have. And there are limits to where that can get you,” Sairi admonished him. “What if your opponent comes at you with their whole heart, too? There’s nothing you can do, right?” Her smile didn’t reach her eyes. “This is what I had to do in order to see her.”

She was done looking back at Ryouta.

The door to Ominaeshi’s room was not locked.

That was because everyone knew such a thing would be essentially pointless.

The door slowly opened.

“Hello. I know you didn’t invite me, but I’m here. I did send a letter, at least.”

Sairi looked at everyone in the room.

When her gaze met with Shiren’s, the girl looked a bit frightened.

“What about Ryouta and Sasara?! What happened to them?!”

“They’re fine. They’re alive. I did hurt them, though. One of them is still crawling after me.”

Shiren spotted Ryouta struggling toward them. “Ryouta! Are you okay?!”

“I-I’m not really, no… But I’m pretty used to it by now, so…”

The problem was that at this rate, nothing would be resolved. The enemy in question was still very much in top shape.

“Nice to see you again, Ominaeshi.”

“To think we would cross paths again. I was hoping I had seen the last of you, but…*this* time, I shall send you into the great depths of hell.”

“There’s no need for empty bluffs. No offense, Ominaeshi, but you’re just a normal Sacred Blooded. No match for me at all. And that’s why you used a weapon **back then**, too, isn’t it?”

Ominaeshi absently clicked her tongue.

Her expression said that Sairi had brought up a memory she didn’t want to think about.

“And so you will drop me into the depths of hell instead? I suppose it would be nice to be able to follow Ouen. I would not have to worry about you getting in my way in the afterlife.”

“Sorry, but I’m not here to reminisce. There’s no turning back the clock on all that, is there? You can blame me for it, or you can blame yourself for it—but it won’t save anyone. Not even poor Ouen,” Sairi said, her tone light.

“Sairi Fuyukura… Weren’t you the one to kill Father…?”

Ouka could not hide her bewilderment, either. How could the suspect in her father’s murder be so calm and collected?

However, she was doing better than Shiren, who could not speak at all.

Shiren couldn’t draw her bleary eyes away from Sairi.

“I had no idea the current emperor would also be out of the loop. As they say, you must fool your allies first to fool your enemy. If you really don’t know, then in a way, this is perfect.”

“What are you talking about? I am not following at all…”

“Can I tell them, Ominaeshi?” Sairi asked, her eyes earnest.

“Hmph! And what are you hoping to accomplish, deferring to me like that?”

“You made the right choice. I still think so. I don’t know what you think of me, but I never hated you. Because I know if our positions were reversed, I would have done the same thing. And things would have turned out the exact same way. I know it caused Shiren a lot of pain as a result, but it was the best choice if you consider the whole of the Sacred Blooded.”

“What, *what*?! What happened?!” Ouka shouted with tears in her voice.

Of course she wanted to know the reason her father had been killed.

But she had naturally separated herself from the matter, knowing it was territory she must not venture into. She had done her best all her life to make sure she never crossed that line.

“I shall tell you everything, Ouka,” Ominaeshi said. “In fact, you should punish me for not telling you sooner. It was all because I was too soft…” She slowly stood from her coffin. “When I managed to gain positive proof that Sairi was a spy for the Virginal Father, I went into her room. Ouen was there, too. I knew I had to settle the matter as quickly as possible. If I took my time, there was a chance that Ouen might be killed.”

Ominaeshi gestured to Sairi with her hand.

Her fingers formed the shape of a gun.

"And so I turned the gun toward Sairi. I could no longer allow her to live, I told her. I asked if she knew the reason why. She was prepared for this, and she nodded."

Sairi nodded, replicating her actions from the past.

"It would be too cruel to make Ouen do it. If anyone was to, it had to be me, I thought. And I fired the gun."

There was a pause.

Silence settled over the room.

It was almost as though Ominaeshi was still praying that time would stop.

"In the next moment, Ouen leaped in front of Sairi. He took the shot for her. And right after that, he took his last breath." Ominaeshi gritted her teeth in regret. "What follows is all conjecture, but I believe Sairi did not want Ouen's sacrifice to be in vain, so she immediately escaped. We had positive proof that she was a part of the Virginal Father, so we pinned the crime of Ouen's assassination on her. In order to hold the country together, all other truths were unnecessary."

No one could interrupt her.

And so her revelations continued.

"What do you think would happen if we made it public that a man—our emperor—threw himself into the line of fire in order to save a woman he *knew* was a part of the Virginal Father? The Sacred Blooded would no longer know what to believe. And the rest, as they say, is history."

"So the one who killed Father wasn't Sairi…"

Ouka fell to her knees.

It was Ominaeshi who shot the previous emperor.

Or, no—was the one responsible Ouen himself?

"Ominaeshi isn't the criminal here. She had no reason to kill Ouen. And I know what his last words to her were." Sairi repeated what the emperor had said in his dying moments like it was yesterday. "'I'm sorry, Ominaeshi. I leave the Empire in your hands.'"

Ominaeshi gave a small nod.

"That's why you immediately announced that Ouka would be named emperor and took the position of empress dowager yourself to work on settling the situation. You hid yourself underground so that all the power

would consolidate under Ouka's control. Isn't that right?"

Sairi was calm. There was no warmth in her expression—as only one who had survived great hardship could manage.

"But I didn't come here to talk about the past. I wrote it clearly in my letter." Sairi turned to look at Shiren. "I'm here to take Ouen's and my daughter, Shiren, back to Japan," she said briefly, as though there was nothing else she needed to say.

"Why…why do I have to go to Japan? I'm Sacred Blooded. The emperor's blood flows through my veins—I am a perfectly respectable Sacred Blooded. I don't want to go to Japan!"

"Because you and I can't live here together. That's all. And I'm being frank with you. This is my selfish wish. Though, I don't know how you feel about it, Shiren." Sairi had clearly laid out her own desires.

There's that word again, Shiren thought.

Selfish.

All her blood relations always talked about what *they* wanted.

But maybe, it was retribution.

She was fully aware of how she had pushed through her own selfish desire to stay with Ryouta.

"After leaving you on your own all this time, the least I can do for you is to create an environment where we can live together. And that's why I took over the Virginal Father. There is no one in Japan to come after you."

"Still, this is all so sudden…"

"I'm so sorry for leaving you alone. Come to Japan with me, Shiren. It's a lot safer there for you than it is living in the Empire, at least."

"It's not really dangerous here, though—"

"There are still people out there who hate you, solely because you're Sairi Fuyukura's daughter. Even if things have been peaceful for you so far, we don't know how long that peace will last. It doesn't mean there aren't people out there who might try to destroy you later. In fact, I'm sure they will."

Shiren fell silent, unable to agree or disagree with Sairi.

Her mother hadn't been the one to kill her father and was here now looking at her lovingly and with clear eyes.

Shiren knew there was no malice behind them.

Though it was true that Shiren had suffered a lot with no way to contact

her mother, she knew there was nothing her mother could have done, considering the circumstances. If she had acted carelessly, she could have been accused of counterspying.

It was so trivial. A spy in enemy territory, falling in love and then bearing a little girl… What a picturesque love story. And it was almost too much for parent and child to be reunited like this now.

The main character of this story was trying to rouse Shiren.

"I know I've caused you so much pain up till now. I don't think I could ever make that up to you. But we can live out our future together… We can eat lots of good food together. We can do so many fun things together!"

To both Ryouta and Ouka, it seemed like Sairi had suddenly become a much weaker person.

She wasn't a warrior for the Virginal Father. She was a pitiful mother who only had eyes for her daughter.

"Shiren, please… *You're the only one I have…*"

Shiren looked hard at Ryouta over Sairi's shoulder.

She then turned to look hard at Ouka.

And at last, she remembered what Ominaeshi said to them.

"You will be destroyed if you try to take him from each other."

The two of them would never be happy.

A real-life example—Ominaeshi and Sairi—was right here.

If she stayed here in the Empire, either she or Ouka would be miserable.

But if she were to leave for Japan…

If that were enough to solve everything…

"There's nothing to be afraid of in Japan anymore. If there were, I would protect you. I know it took some time, but you don't have to suffer anymore. I…I need you!"

To Sairi, taking back Shiren was a pretext, not her real reason. Her real goal was only to tell Shiren how much she needed her.

Shiren knew that.

She knew right away what her mother was thinking.

If she said no here, then she knew Sairi would stand down. She would return to Japan, acting like this whole incident had never happened.

Sairi didn't believe that her daughter had forgiven her. She knew that Shiren had her own life. If anything, she was clinging to a sliver of hope. And if that hope was to shatter, she planned to give up on it all.

And she would live on in Japan alone.

Shiren bit her lip.

The taste of blood was somehow different from when she drank Ryouta's.

She had always been alone.

She had been in pain for such a long time.

Until she met Ryouta, at least.

That was why she didn't want to leave anyone to struggle through life by themselves.

And Sairi's face looked so much like her own back then. It almost hurt.

Shiren had always thought that she had been left behind to fend for herself, but Sairi had gone through the same.

And not only that, but Shiren was also the only one who could save her.

"I'll go to Japan, Mom," Shiren said in a quiet voice.

Neither Ouka nor Ryouta had imagined this would happen.

But before either of them could act, Shiren spoke again.

"Take care of Ryouta for me, Big Sis."

"What…?"

"You should be my big sis's minion, Ryouta. That way, no one has to be sad."

"Hold on a second, Shiren! Are you fully awake here?"

"Let's go, Mom. I don't think we should stay too long." Shiren took Sairi's hand.

"Y-yes…" Sairi, in turn, tugged on her daughter's hand.

They passed by Ryouta.

"I'm sorry, Ryouta."

"Sorry…? You can't mean that!"

"Our minion-master contract ends here. All that's left for you to do is live well as Big Sis's minion. I know you two will be happy together."

When Ryouta turned around, all he saw was Shiren's back.

"Wait."

It couldn't end like this. He couldn't, he *wouldn't* let it end like this.

He reached out and grabbed her arm.

"You're kidding, right? Come back…"

"Doing this will bring the greatest amount of happiness to the most people."

“What the hell are you talking about…? You know you can’t quantify happiness with a number, right?”

“It’s fine! I’ve made my decision! Your ex-master has made up her mind, so you, ex-minion, shut up!”

“I can’t do that! You don’t *look* happy at all! How can your minion just sit here and watch this all happen?!”

A minion must act on behalf of their master, no matter what.

Even if his master was telling him not to.

“I couldn’t make you my minion!” Shiren cried. “That’s the final result! To tell the truth, it was strange that we were still living together! Once I was able to take care of myself, you had no more obligation to stay with me! It was unfair of me to keep you there so long after it was over!” She continued, still hiding her face from him, “And…my sister was your first love, wasn’t she?”

“Y-yeah, but… Oh—”

Ryouta’s and Ouka’s eyes met.

Ouka looked like she wasn’t sure what kind of expression she should make.

Her lips parted briefly. “Oh… Ry…,” she said hoarsely. “Ryouta, is that true…?”

“Y-yeah… it is…”

“That makes me happy… But now wasn’t the right time to ask, was it?”

Ryouta hadn’t wanted it brought up in this situation, either.

Once it was, he couldn’t recover.

“And that’s why you should be her minion! It’s fate! After all this time, you still aren’t my minion—it’s a sign!”

Ryouta fell to his knees as his strength gave out—although his spirit had broken first.

He had been unable to say, *No, I love you!*

If he had, it would have been because he was caught up in the moment, and it would be no match for Shiren’s sincerity.

Ouka came to stand next to Ryouta.

“Shiren… Let me ask you one more time. Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“I wouldn’t go back on my word. I’m the emperor’s daughter, too. I stand behind my decision. And I thought we already made a promise in this

very castle.”

Sasara and Alfoncina had been witness to their agreement. Once Shiren let go of Ryouta, he would be Ouka’s minion.

“…All right. And in exchange, there will be no regretting this decision or hating me, okay? You chose this path on your own!”

Slowly, Shiren turned to look back at Ouka and the others. Streams of tears stained her face. “Then you have to be happy, Big Sis.”

“I know. I promise.”

A hint of tears colored Ouka’s voice.

“Let’s go, Mom. I’m done.”

“Okay. It does seem like staying would be cruel.”

Ryouta could no longer call out to her.

This was a decision that Shiren had made specifically by her own will.

And disrespecting that would be disrespectful to her choices.

After casting a glance toward Shiren and Sairi, now specks in the distance, Ouka said, “Ryouta Asagiri, I will officially make you, an Imperial guard, into a minion belonging to me, the emperor. Any objections?”

“…No. I don’t have a master anymore, after all. But…” He hated that his eyes were welling with tears, but he couldn’t hide his emotion. “Could you wait to drink my blood? I’m not doing so great…”

“You’re right. We can wait until things calm down.”

Ouka abruptly sighed.

She then reached out and placed both of her hands on Ryouta’s exhausted face.

“Ryouta, I’ve always wanted to make you my minion. Even back in elementary school.”

Ryouta’s mind was sent further into chaos at the sudden confession.

“What about me impressed you so much?”

“These things don’t need reasons. That’s what I thought, and that’s all.”

“Ahh… Maybe you’re right.”

“So to be honest, I’m relieved that Shiren’s gone now. Now I can make you my minion. I mean, we both like each other, right? We can spend all our time together and not have to worry about anything else. I’ll use my powers as emperor to their fullest to enjoy everything: fireworks, the pool, festivals, Christmas, skiing trips, the first shrine visit of the year, hot spring

tours, all of it. I'll arrest everyone who gets in the way. Oh, I'm so, so happy just thinking about it."

"Then why…?" He couldn't believe what she said. "Then why are you crying, Ouka…?"

It was like the last string holding her emotions together had been cut—tears began spilling down her face. Nothing about how she looked said she was happy.

"Shiren's gone; of course I'm sad! I could never have both things I want!" Tears poured from her eyes with such vigor that it surprised even Ouka herself. "I was going to take you from her… And I thought I wouldn't care if she was sad, so long as I was happy, but…I didn't realize it'd be so painful… There's no joy in this at all!"

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“I believe this was the right choice. You are just imagining the pain you are feeling right now,” Ominaeshi said, but her expression was no more joyful than Ouka’s. “Indeed—it must all be your imagination.”

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THE MAGNIFICENT FOURTEEN

Galeblade Kena

Prickler Iriael

Naru the Imaginary

Phillea the Cruel

Clear Ice Ilhue

Sarelil the Shatterer

EPILOGUE

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EPILOGUE

Guarded by members of the Virginal Father, Shiren crossed into the mountains that formed the national border. Along the way, they spent the night on the Japan side of the border in a bed-and-breakfast.

A car was waiting for them, and they departed early the next morning.

Shiren sat in the back seat with Sairi as the car made its way into the city. The Japanese streets stretched out before them, not much different from those in the Empire. But the Empire was now off-limits to Shiren.

"You make crossing the border look so easy, Mom."

"Of course. You just need a little courage. And I also have a lot of people helping me in Oshiro."

"Helping you? Are there really that many people in the Virginal Father?"

"That's part of it. Half of the people in the Virginal Father right now are Sacred Blooded anyway. Not me, though."

"—What?"

"For a long time, the Sacred Blooded have been infiltrating the Virginal Father in order to remake it. But the Sacred Blooded themselves have changed so much over the years, I don't think the Jouryuuji family ever had a chance of noticing."

"Don't tell me the Empire had a hand in this, too…?"

It was an unbelievably elaborate plot. Shiren was at a loss for words. It was true that if the Virginal Father was to be snuffed out, the Sacred Blooded would no longer have any enemies.

"Oh, it has nothing to do with that empire."

Shiren's expectations were quickly undercut.

Then what had overtaken the order?

"You know, the Sacred Blooded aren't a monolith. The ones taking part in the Empire are only a very small proportion of them. In fact, I'd say there are more of *us* across the country."

“That means…there’s a-another organization besides the Empire…?”

Indeed, if it had been the Empire’s plot to infiltrate the Virginal Father, then Ouka and Alfoncina certainly would have known something.

There were so many more hands at play here.

“We believe that they’ve been warping the teachings of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood. That’s why we’re building something else, the right way.”

Skyscrapers began to enter Shiren’s field of view; Oshiro was a big city with a population ten times that of Akinomiya.

“But, Mom, you’re not Sacred Blooded. Why are you…?”

A simple question escaped Shiren’s lips.

Sairi was genetically unrelated to the Sacred Blooded, so why was she taking part in such an extraordinary plot?

“Well, that’s because…”

The car stopped before she could answer.

Before them was a great cathedral, its steeple reaching high into the heavens.

Around the building was a throng of people wearing formal clothes. How many of them were Sacred Blooded?

An older gentleman of good physique came to stand before Sairi. The aura about him suggested that he was a very important person.

“A hearty welcome back from your long journey to you and your daughter, New Progenitor Alfoncina.”

“What?! What does that mean…?”

The man had, indeed, called Shiren’s mother by an unthinkable name.

“Shiren, the ones who created the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood weren’t Sacred Blooded themselves—they were humans. They all prayed to the Goddess of Blood so that the Sacred Blooded and humans could stand together as equals. A family that inherits the great goddess’s blood is not just awesome, but holy.”

Sairi gently stroked her hand across Shiren’s head.

Almost as if to embed her teachings into Shiren’s body.

“The descendant of Progenitor Alfoncina is me. And you…,” Sairi crouched down to look Shiren directly in the eyes. “…are the emperor. Of this country.”

A great curtain hung in front of the cathedral.

The Holy Sacred Blood Empire Founding Ceremony

"We bought out a portion of Japan's land ourselves and decided to make our own country. We got permission to do so as a retaliatory measure against the empire over there."

"I-I'm the emperor…?"

"It's not all that strange. You have Ouen's blood in you. And one day, I'll give my seat as archbishop to you. You'll stand at the top of both the religious and civil spheres of power." Sairi then added, almost as a joke, "And it isn't fair that only Ominaeshi's daughter gets to be emperor."

The bright rays of the sun woke him up.

He immediately knew that he'd overslept.

"Oh, sorry, Shiren, I don't have time to make any breakfast today, so grab a pastry or something! You didn't eat them already as a midnight snack, did you?!—Oh, right."

Ryouta didn't need to think about Shiren anymore.

He wasn't even in the Fuyukura abode. He was in a hospital bed. He didn't have it as bad as Sasara, but he was still injured.

The clock told him it was past ten AM. He had slept late, probably due to his injuries.

"I don't have anything else to do…so I may as well turn on the TV."

It was unlikely there was anything interesting on at this hour, but it still hurt to move, and he of course hadn't brought any books to read or anything to study for school.

The normally careless Empire station had an unusually panicked tone the moment he turned it on.

"Oh, it must be because of yesterday—"

But the words on the screen were completely different than what he had expected.

Holy Sacred Blood Empire Founded in Oshiro!

"What…?"

He couldn’t comprehend the words on the screen as the image shifted to a close-up of a lone girl wearing a magnificent dress.

It was the Holy Sacred Blood Empire’s first emperor.

Shiren the First.

THE MAGNIFICENT FOURTEEN

Leftover Filla

※"You Call That a Locked Room?" is an amended and edited version

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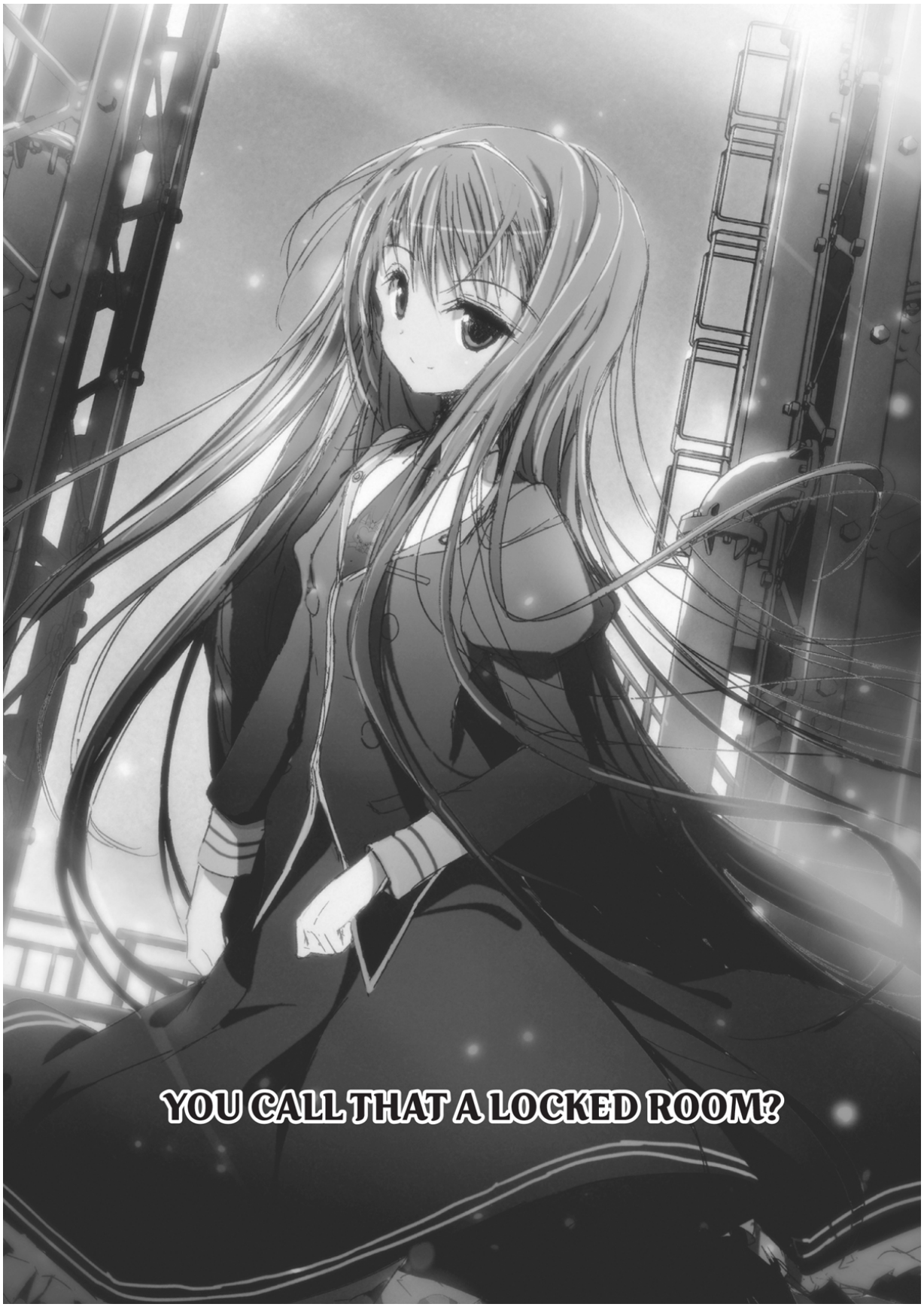
※"You Call That a Locked Room?" is an amended and edited version of a short story published in GA Bunko, Vol. 6.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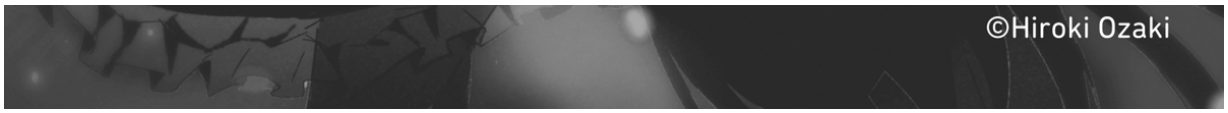
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“All right, everyone, thank you so much~. You don’t have to pay any membership fees today, so just relax. You don’t have to pay anything at all. No fees, no payments, it’s all free.”

“You’re putting a weird amount of emphasis on the ‘free’ part! We get it!”

This was the Empire’s state guesthouse.

It sat on castle grounds, but it was its own independent building away from the castle itself.

On the first floor was a hall used for parties, and on the second floor and above were rooms for the guests.

“So what inspired you to throw a party like this?”

Ryouta could scarcely believe that Ouka would hold an event for free.

“My dinner party got canceled and freed up the facilities. It’s efficient and practical to use the setup for something else.”

“Right, I see.”

“If not, I would not have invited everyone for free. Do not take me for a softy, okay?!”

“No need to act tough about it! Shouldn’t you be more upset? I can’t believe you’d invite us to a party for free?!”

“The heavens would punish me if I wasted all my citizens’ hard-earned tax money on a party. I wouldn’t deserve to govern.”

“Wow, that actually sounded kind of cool!”

“And we don’t even have enough tax money for me to throw nice parties when I feel like it! Pay your taxes, citizens! We can’t do anything with a budget this small!”

“Don’t get angry about it! Maybe you don’t deserve to govern!”

The party was, incidentally, a standing buffet.

“Did you know buffets save us money on personnel expenses?”

“You really don’t need to bring real world economics into this.”

Those in attendance were Ouka, emperor and party organizer; Sasara, Ouka’s personal Imperial guard; Rei, the emperor’s attending ninja; Shiren, Ouka’s little sister; Ryouta, Shiren’s (provisional) minion; Alfoncina, the Imperial archbishop; Tamaki, their school classmate whose family ran a convenience store; Kokoko, who worked at said store; and Kiyomizu, who wasn’t invited but showed up anyway—nine people in all.

The party hall was full of the group’s usual energy. Sasara was

exclaiming, “Lady Ouka, you look positively stunning as you eat! I’ve taken the perfect photo!” as she snapped picture after picture of Ouka, expressing her extreme and vaguely stalker-like love for her master. Kiyomizu was on the same wavelength, taking pictures and declaring, “I am going to take so many photos of you eating, Ryouta dearest!” Tamaki was in a funk, muttering, “*Sigh*, I feel like my dinner today is a slap in the face to my family, who are only eating rice and leftovers from the store… I’m sorry for being born…” Rei was screaming, having unfortunately dropped her fork prongs-down into her foot. Kokoko was picking out the carrots from all the dishes and only eating those. All the while, Shiren was silently stuffing her face without prejudice.

Among the others, Alfoncina was quite graceful; it was likely she was used to these kinds of parties.

“I can’t say I’m surprised, Alfoncina,” Ryouta said. “But you seem totally at home here. I guess you were just raised differently…”

“We all have to relax once in a while. I’ve been up for two nights in a row now because of manga deadlines.”

“That’s not exactly the refined home life I was imagining!”

“To be honest, I don’t have much energy to eat, but I have a feeling I’ll faint if I don’t eat now, so I’m forcing it all into my stomach, hee-hee…”

“Whoa! Your eyes are glazing over! You *are* going to faint!”

“When things are really bad, I try to ignore it by chugging energy drinks.”

“You really shouldn’t resort to doping to make it through life’s rough patches! You really will fall apart!’

“What are you talking about, Sonko…? You know a strategy like that will mean the death of the whole squadron…”

“And now she’s talking to her own characters! Just go to bed! You’re past the tipping point!”

“I’m okay, Rouko’s okay…”

“Wait, now she thinks she’s one of her own characters, too?!”

Around then, Sasara walked over.

“Well, now that I’ve finished with that (‘that’ being taking photos of the beautiful Lady Ouka), I can concentrate on the food.”

“You also look like you belong here, minus all the photography,” Ryouta remarked. “But I guess you *are* nobility.”

“The food is quite good. But personally, I think the *tonkatsu* dipping noodles from Konishiya, the *abura* soba from Ootora, and the *niboshi* ramen from Ujiteru taste much better.”

“You really like ramen, don’t you?”

“Not exactly, but any noble worth their salt makes an effort to understand the lower classes. And thus, I arrived at the conclusion that ramen and the common folk go hand in hand. For example, the establishment Isokaze is well-known for providing such volume that their regular size could be mistaken for a large or even an extra-large. I have heard the restaurant began out of a desire to fill the bellies of poor students for a cheap price. Isn’t that a nice story? Ahh, ramen is truly the best.”

“It sounds like you just want to talk about ramen.”

“No, that’s not the case at all. Sakuraya has good gyoza, too. You can request an extra helping of gyoza miso, and it is simply the best. The meat juices and the miso together are a match made in heaven.”

“I didn’t mean you should change the topic to gyoza!”

“Ah, and when you add the onion paste from Ryuuhei into the soup ***She continues to speak about ramen for a while. The rest is omitted.**”

Still, this crowd makes me a little uneasy…

Ryouta wasn’t sure if it was just a coincidence or some kind of bad joke, but everyone here was a girl whom he had some kind of connection with.

“You look pale, Ryouta. Your fancy tomato dishes are going cold. We don’t get to eat this very often.” Shiren was munching away at the tomatoes on her plate.

“You seem relaxed…”

“The basis of life is food. What’s wrong with enjoying a meal? And these tomatoes are delicious!”

“The Sacred Blooded sure like tomatoes…”

Red things were a favorite among the Sacred Blooded. After living here for a while, that fact had really begun to sink in for Ryouta.

“It is a bit of a disappointment that we still use mostly tomatoes from Japan, though. The majority of their tomatoes are of the Momotaro cultivar. But they constitute only a small portion of one variety of the tomatoes found worldwide. I am eagerly awaiting the day when I can eat all kinds of tomatoes. And then a tomato full-course meal would really be worth it.”

“I can’t follow a tomato discussion on that level!”

“We have other tasty foods here besides tomatoes.” It was then that Ouka, organizer of the party, approached. “You see, we have harvested safe and worry-free vegetables from the garden on the castle grounds.”

“Oh, yeah. Come to think of it, you do grow a lot here.”

“Our vegetables are high quality and are completely pesticide- and poison-free.”

“I’d recommend not going out of your way to make poison-free a selling point.”

Thinking about it now, Ryouta recalled that there were all kinds of scary, poisonous mushrooms in the castle vegetable gardens. According to Ouka, they were used in politics.

He had a feeling it wasn’t wise to ask too many questions, so he didn’t know any details.

“Please tell me you didn’t put poison mushrooms in the food…” He looked down at the mushroom spaghetti on his plate.

“How rude. Of course not. And to prove it, I’ve already eaten plenty myself.”

Ouka looked down at her own plate.

Just as she’d said, it looked like she’d already started on her spaghetti.

“Look, the greatest chef in the Empire made this Japanese-style mushroom spaghetti, so it’d be a pity if you didn’t eat it. See? There’s none left.”

She was right—none was left on the serving plate.

“Hey, you’re right. I didn’t think you guys would eat all that much. And everyone’s a girl besides me.”

“We had smaller portions made in order to save on ingredient costs.”

“Somehow, I knew that would be the punch line!”

“It’s not all that unusual. It’s standard to only make enough food for about seventy percent of the guests at buffet parties. Have you ever heard of one where everyone gets absolutely stuffed?”

“Yeah, I guess not…”

“We didn’t even make enough for fifty percent this time, though.”

“So that’s why the food is going so fast!”

“And that’s why you should eat quickly.”

“You’re right. I’ll go and grab som—”

“Your Majesty! We made a mistake and included some poison mushrooms!”

The chef rushed into the room and made a shocking announcement.

“””””””””Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!!!”””””””””

Everyone present shouted at once.

Judging by their reactions, everyone but Ryouta had already eaten some.

“Ryouta dearest! I want to get to home base with you before I die!” Kiyomizu rushed into Ryouta’s arms on the verge of tears. “We should die together, even! We can be bound together for eternity in the next life! Let us depart!”

“Wait, wait! Calm down, Kiyomizu! Let’s get the situation in order first!”

Even though the mushrooms were poisonous, they still didn’t know what kind of toxins were in them.

They might only end up getting a bit of food poisoning, and even if the mushrooms were dangerous, they might just need to vomit them up.

“To be honest, even if I live or die, I still want to get to—”

“Well, at least *you’re* acting the same as usual.” Ryouta used both hands to push Kiyomizu aside like he always did.

“But there’s one person who has gone pale and collapsed…,” Kiyomizu pointed out.

Beside them, Rei had fainted.

“Hey, Rei! Are you okay?!”

“I was so shocked that food got caught in my throat… *Ehem, ehem…*”

“Oh, so it wasn’t poison. You’re fine, then.”

“What, you refuse to look after your big sister in her time of need…? *Ehem, ehem…*”

“If I had to help you every time something like this happened, I’d be looking after you more than ten times in a day.”

Rei fainted so much that Ryouta couldn’t bother with her anymore.

Past them, Tamaki sat at a table writing something down.

“*Sigh…* Dying in an accident like this is somehow fitting for me, I suppose. It was a short but fun life. I went hiking with my second father, and he almost left me there on the mountain, I went hiking with my third

father, and he almost pushed me off a cliff, and then when I went with my fourth father to the woods, he almost buried me there… Ahh, what a good life. Now, let me write my will…”

“Shijou, your despair is so overwhelming, I can’t even approach!”

“It was such a fun life, in one sense of the word. Other people will have lots of fun laughing at me…”

“Her will is an unsalvageable tragedy!”

“When I realize I will finally be at peace, I feel strangely at ease…”

“Stop right there! If we all survive, let’s go to an amusement park or something! Something to lift our spirits!”

Meanwhile, the chef was telling Ouka about the mushrooms.

“Ah~, I see. There was no poison in the cooking process, but there were poisonous mushrooms mixed in with the ingredients. I see, I see~.”

Ryouta didn’t think that sounded much better.

Ouka then marched straight into the center of the room and spoke up.

“There’s no need to panic yet. I’ve confirmed what kind of mushroom it is, and it’s not the kind that will cause any sort of pain or death.”

“Oh, so we’ll be fine, then.”

Ryouta’s two biggest fears had been crossed out, and a sense of relief flooded the room.

“How fortunate. The mushroom field next to it was only for killing, so we’d all be dead right now if it had been one of those.”

“Don’t grow things like that, then!”

“We need the darkness to see the value of light, Ryouta.”

“I feel like you’re trying to gloss over this somehow…”

“But I think you’re all a little too calm. You still ate something toxic, after all.”

She was right.

“So what kind of toxin was it?”

“The bashful kind.”

“Huh?”

Everyone in the room was confused.

“The name of this mushroom is the bashful mushroom. It’s an

aphrodisiac that makes you flustered and embarrassed if there's someone you are attracted to nearby. There are reportedly individual differences as to when the toxin starts to take effect, but it subsides quickly once symptoms start appearing. If you go straight to sleep, then you should be back to normal once you wake up. It should be out of your systems by tomorrow morning."

"Why are you cultivating a mushroom like that…?"

"We use it in diplomacy. We often feed it to foreign ministers from other countries."

"That's some dangerous diplomacy!"

"Anyway, even though it's not going to put any of our lives in danger…"

For some reason, Ouka turned to stare at Ryouta.

Hard.

"Er, why are you looking at me…?"

"…I cannot say that the symptoms won't have a negative effect on our current relationships. So that's why I'm going to ask all of you to stay put in your own rooms. So long as you stay away from one another, you'll be fine."

The entire party moved to the upper floors of the state guesthouse, where they found rows of guest rooms.

They had all planned to stay the night here anyway.

Everyone had a whole room to themselves.

"All right, I know it's a bit early, but we're calling it here for today. Keep your rooms locked when you sleep, and you won't have any embarrassment with anyone."

"This reminds me of a locked-room murder mystery, and it's giving me the creeps…"

If things proceeded in that direction, someone would certainly wind up dead.

"It's my duty as host to keep my guests safe, and I have prepared accordingly."

Farther down the hallway was a group of people who looked like knights.

“Imperial soldiers, if you see anyone enter the corridor and begin acting strangely, seize them.”

“I see, that will keep us safe.”

“This is Leftover Filla and Brittle the Trainee, both members of the Imperial Guard.”

“Why’d you pick such weak-sounding soldiers?!”

“They are both lower rank, so they are cheaper. I’ll have to pay considerable overtime if I get a Sasara-class guard to work off-hours!”

“So it comes down to money once again!”

“And, soldiers, if Sasara tries to get into my room, stop her. My chastity is at stake here.”

“You really don’t trust her, do you?! And isn’t Sasara an Imperial guard, too…?”

“The doors to this building are shut, by the way, so no one will be able to get in, either.”

“Now it’s really starting to sound like a locked-room mystery…”

“Oh, Ryouta, I forgot to tell you something important.”

“What, just me…?”

“At the end of the hallway, there is a video-card vending machine. Buy one and input the number on the TV in your room to watch all the porn you want.”

“Don’t single me out for that kind of thing! I’m not gonna buy one!”

That was indeed a common sight in business hotels. But Ryouta didn’t think it belonged in a state guesthouse.

“We’ll be locking the rooms as a general rule, so buy one now if you want one.”

“That makes buying one even more awkward!”

“Oh, you can just say you’re going to watch some classic films.”

“Absolutely no one will believe that excuse!”

“You’re a hard sell. They normally cost a thousand sacred yen, but I’ll make it five hundred sacred yen especially for you, Ryouta.”

“I told you, no thank you!”

Despite a tinge of unease, Ryouta entered his room.

The inside was like any other hotel room—to the left was the bath and toilet, and the bed was farther toward the back.

There was also a TV, but it was more of an older model. It was in places

like this that Ouka's penchant for pinching pennies came through.

Since he hadn't eaten any of the mushrooms, he took a long shower and relaxed.

There wasn't any kind of bathrobe provided in the rooms, so he was just wearing what he'd been wearing earlier. That was probably another cost that had been cut.

It was a weird time of the night—still too early to sleep, but he couldn't exactly go out, either.

Knock, knock, knock.

Someone was at the door.

"Uh, who is it…?"

He thought walking around in the hall was forbidden—so who was knocking?

"I'm one of the soldiers. I'm on patrol. Please open the door."

"Oh, a guard… But wait, I still can't trust you…"

He had a feeling that opening this door would eventually lead to his death.

"I am Filla Yamashita, Imperial guard (age twenty-six). I like skiing. I've recently been into making my own pizzas at home."

"Thanks for the introduction, but I still don't know if any of that is correct, so it doesn't mean I trust you!"

"Then look through the peephole and see for yourself."

Ryouta peeked through the hole and saw a woman standing there, wearing an Imperial Guard uniform.

"It's true, then… I'm opening the door."

"I'm sorry, I lied."

"What…?"

"I lied about making pizza. I really make soba noodles at home."

"I don't care if that part is true or not! Either way, you're into making food. That's all I need to know!"

"Those are fighting words in the world of cooking."

"Sure, but that is so far off topic right now, I don't care! I'm opening the door!"

He felt confident he wouldn't be murdered right away, so he unlocked the door.

"Ryouta dearest, I missed you!"

Kiyomizu immediately flew in. He had barely opened the door, and yet she had slid through the crack.

"Now then, let us enjoy an amorous affair! We will leave no clues behind."

"Hold on! How did you get here?! What about the guards?!"

"I defeated them." Her answer came quickly.

There was an unconscious Imperial guard lying in the hallway—Kiyomizu must have brought them along as a decoy.

"These underling guards are sooo weak."

"I guess there's no point if the guests are stronger than the guards…"

Ouka's penny-pinching had backfired on her. She'd lost sight of the entire point.

"But the voice I just heard was different from yours—"

"**I can change my voice all I like**," she said in a baritone. "Anyone who gets between us is my enemy. And besides, I'm Kiyomizu of the Virginal Father. Those guards didn't stand a chance!"

Oh yeah, Kiyomizu was originally an assassin or something…

At any rate, he couldn't let things continue like this.

"C'mon, Kiyomizu, you should go straight back to your room. Actually, I— Huh?"

Ryouta realized he was bound up in rope.

"How can you even move that fast?! And…isn't this turtle-shell bondage…?"

"You and I are bound by the red thread of fate, Ryouta dearest!"

"This isn't thread; this is rope! And we aren't 'bound'; you've just tied me up! Oh… Hold on a second." Something about this felt a little strange to Ryouta. "You ate some of the bashful shrooms, but you're acting pretty normal, Kiyomizu."

"I am always affectionate with you, Ryouta dearest, so I believe the effects have been minimal."

"I guess you're right…"

What she said and did on a daily basis was already abnormal, so there had been no change. That solved that—actually, that didn't solve anything. This was a pretty desperate situation, in fact…

"Now, Ryouta dearest, let us enjoy a long night togeth—"

Kiyomizu collapsed onto Ryouta.

“Kiyomizu, stop! …Huh?”

“Zzz, zzz…”

She had fallen asleep.

The effects of the mushroom had apparently worn off.

It seemed to be true that the person affected would fall asleep once their period of infatuation was over.

“*Phew*, that’s good… But I’m still tied up, so what should I do…? It’s not going to be easy getting this off by myself…”

At that moment, the door opened.

“Goodness, look at you…”

It was Sasara Tatsunami. She was wearing pajamas—perhaps she had been about to go to bed.

“I heard a commotion, so I came out into the corridor, only to find you like *this*… And with Filla collapsed outside the door…”

“There’s a really good reason for all this. Sorry, but could you untie me? There’s been a little accident. I think you can guess what when you look at Kiyomizu…”

“But perhaps I’ve come at just the right time.”

“What?”

Sasara lifted him up, still bound, and took him to the bed. No way was this happening…

“Ryouta Fuyukura, you made me drink your blood once… Though I had no other choice in the matter back then, it is still an unspeakably shameful thing for an unmarried man and woman to drink each other’s blood… S-so…you must take responsibility for your actions…”

Sasara’s face went red, and she was unable to meet his eyes.

She was entirely under the effects of the bashful shroom.

Things had taken a bad turn…

“Sasara, listen to me with whatever shreds of logic you have left in there. You’re going to regret it for the rest of your life if this keeps going. R-right? And don’t you have Ouka…?”

Ryouta had the feeling he was throwing Ouka under the bus here, but that wasn’t important right now. If things went badly, then Sasara could be seriously harmed, too…

“My love for Lady Ouka and my love for you are completely different… There is no need to worry; I won’t stop halfway… I can take maternity

leave from the Imperial Guard… I—I will bring up our children with love…”

“This is not the time to be making plans for the future!”

“I want three children at most… And we will get them into a prestigious elementary school.”

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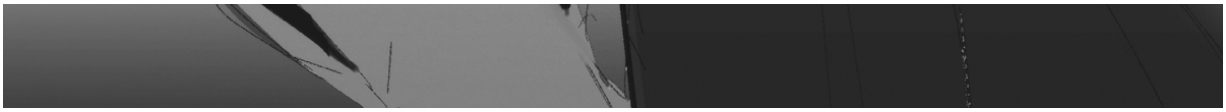

“You’re getting more and more specific!”

“We will name them Nobunaga, Mitsuhide, and Hideyoshi, so that they will grow up to be outstanding warriors.”

“That sounds like the makings of a bloody tragedy, so please don’t!”

“And if all three of them are girls, then we’ll name the oldest Antoinette __”

“Why are you choosing names that spell out death for all of them?!”

“Then what about Antonio?”

“That’s a boy’s name!”

“Names are but decoration. With enough love, children can be named Piggo or Limpie.”

“No, they can’t! And if you loved them, you wouldn’t give them names like that! You’re ensuring trouble in their future!”

“W-well… That hardly matters now… First, we have to make the children…”

Things were going in an awful direction.

“H-here I go… This is my first time, so I’m not entirely sure what to do…”

Sasara placed a hand on his trousers.

This was bad—it seemed like things were really going to happen…

“Oh, aren’t these cheap jeans from Uniqlo? *Pfft.*”

“Don’t fault other people’s clothes! Where else am I supposed to get clothes from? The Fuyukura household is in dire financial straits!”

“Your belt is quite cheap, too… Your whole outfit is cheap… And I cannot believe you came to a dinner party in jeans in the first place.”

“Stop acting like the fashion police! Hearing that in this situation makes it hurt even more.”

“W-well then… Here I go…”

Ryouta was about to get his jeans pulled down before he could think of anything to stop it.

“Wait! You’ll definitely regret this when you get back to normal! Stop it!”

“—Zzz…”

But that was when Sasara’s consciousness cut out. She had fallen asleep with perfect timing.

“I’m safe. In a way, talking about all that stupid stuff to waste time

really saved me…”

Ryouta wished he could feel total relief, but he was still tied up, so he couldn’t.

“I need to get out of these bindings and lock the door; otherwise, I could be in trouble…”

Kiyomizu had already taken out all the guards, and now anyone was free to come into his room.

He wasn’t entirely sure if there were rules to how being “bashful” worked, but he had a feeling that he was in the most danger as the only man in the group.

“Ehem, ehem.”

It was then that he heard a familiar voice from above.

Rei, Ryouta’s older sister, was on the ceiling.

To be more precise, she was on the chandelier.

“Why are you up there, Rei…?”

“I can react quickly from here if your chastity is put in danger, Ryou, so I thought it would be the perfect *ehem, ehem, ehem*. And then right at the perfect moment, I’ll— Ahh!”

The cable holding up the chandelier broke under her weight.

“Here we— *Guh*…”

Rei made hard contact with the floor and lost consciousness.

Ryouta thought he saw a fragment of the chandelier sticking out of her skin, but she was probably fine. She had always been fine in the past, so there was no reason to believe this time would be any different.

“*Phew*, I’m glad her bad luck came through at the right time.”

She was his actual sister, so her affection for him was a lot more troublesome to deal with than that of the others. This was a relief.

“But there’s no way this is the end… The door’s still open… There are no guards, so anyone can come in…”

As he waited, half resigned to his fate, the door opened a smidge.

The first thing he saw were long rabbit ears.

“I was bored, so I came over.”

“Oh, hey, Kokoko. I could tell it was you by your rabbit ears.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m a fox. Don’t compare me to a lower creature like a rabbit.”

She had grown up being told that she was a fox, so she still thought of herself as one. It wasn't a joke—she genuinely believed it.

"What's your favorite food?"

"Carrots! …And fried tofu."

"You said carrots first, didn't you? So why are you here…?"

Kokoko barged into his room. She had a white sack on her back. It was stuffed with all sorts of things, like some kind of infinity pocket.

She produced some fried tofu from it.

"I brought some really good fried tofu. Be grateful."

"No thanks!"

"You sure are picky, aren't you? Then I suppose I can give you a carrot."

This time, she had veggies.

"At least cook it first!"

"What…? You know I rarely ever give things to other people, right…? O-only like once in a hundred years…"

Tears filled her eyes.

Right… She has divine blood, so she only ever receives offerings from others…

Even though she was acting this way because of the bashful shroom, maybe this was something he should accept.

And Kokoko's affection was a lot more childish than the others; it didn't seem like things would reach a point of no return with her.

"Okay. I guess I'll take the carrot."

"Right. I'll get you ready, then." She pulled down Ryouta's pants. "You're all tied up, so it makes it hard to take them off."

"Wait. What did you mean by 'get me ready'?"

"I'm going to stick this carrot up your buttho—"

"Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!!!"

If he screamed like that in an apartment, someone would definitely come over to complain.

"A god's words are final. And anyway, you said you wanted this."

"Don't try to feed me where the sun doesn't shine! You can just put it in my mouth instead!"

“But wouldn’t feeding you through your mouth be kind of embarrassing…? Our eyes might meet…”

Kokoko shyly looked away.

Her embarrassment is childish, too. It’s almost adorable…

“That’s why your butthole is perfect since we can’t look at each other.”

“It’s not perfect! It’s not! It really isn’t!”

“Also, I bought one of those video cards to watch a naughty video and saw some S-M like that. A man had a carrot up his butt.”

“That’s the reason?! And those videos aren’t for kids!”

“I’m a god, so I’m way over eighteen age-wise.”

“What a cheap double standard…”

“Therefore, I’ll be putting this in your butt.”

“‘Therefore’ doesn’t fit the mood here!”

“It may change into pleasure over time.”

“I don’t want to keep trying!”

And with his pants having been pulled down…

“Hey, I feel slee— *Zzz, zzz…*”

—*Thunk.* Kokoko collapsed to the floor.

“*Phew…* That was probably the biggest danger I’ve faced so far…”

“*Zzz, zzz… Pfft*, it really went in his butt, *zzz, zzz…*”

“Hey! Don’t carry it over into your dreams, too! Get up! …Wait, no, I don’t want you to wake up! Stay asleep! But don’t dream about that, either!”

“And a second one goes in… *Zzz, zzz…*”

“Why do I have to be defiled in someone else’s dream…?”

He decided to be relieved that the damage wasn’t real, at least.

But there were still enemies remaining.

“*Buona sera*, Ryouta! ♪ You’ve got quite the harem here~.”

This time, it was Alfoncina.

Here’s more bad news…

Ryouta froze. Alfoncina was typically on the sultry side even on a normal day, so he wasn’t thrilled to find out what she would be like under the effects of an aphrodisiac…

Being tied up right in front of her made him like a mouse in front of a cat. And she had bitten him before, too.

“Kiyomizu, Sasara, Rei, Kokoko—you look like quite the lady-killer here, don’t you~?”

“Real lady-killers aren’t typically tied up like this… Uh, I don’t expect anything, but I have to ask. Could you undo this rope?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think you would.”

Alfoncina climbed up on the bed with Ryouta.

Sigh, I guess I’d better steel myself for this…

“Hee-hee, I’ve been neglecting you of late, haven’t I, Ryouta?” She reached out to stroke his cheek.

He shivered. An inexpressible feeling coursed through his body.

He couldn’t not get excited when she did stuff like that to him. He was in anguish.

“Oh, just bite me already! It’s not like I can run away!”

Any minute now, he was expecting to feel her chomp down.

But she did no such thing. All she did was deliberately stroke his hair and cheek.

Her expression seemed a bit different than usual, too. There was an air of anxiety about her, and a look of worry on her face.

“What’s wrong, Alfoncina…?”

“You think I’m a carefree woman with no restraint, don’t you, Ryouta? But to tell you the truth…I just want to spend precious time with the one I love…”

“You… Did you say ‘love’…?”

No, no, no—this had to be the effect of the mushrooms. *Don’t worry about it, Ryouta…*

“It’s so nice to just lounge around and do nothing like this with the one I love.” Alfoncina gently embraced him.

His heart was pounding out of his chest, but the warmth was winning out over the intensity.

“You don’t mind if I just stay like this, do you…?”

“N-no, not at all, go ahead…”

He couldn’t say no after she’d asked in such a pleading voice.

“Being archbishop is so stressful. I have to show up for political functions and the like. For now, let me stay with you a while and refresh myself, okay…?”

“Sure, if that’s what you want…”

“…Hic.”

He then heard what sounded like a hiccup.

“Hey, Alfoncina, are you crying?”

He looked up to see her eyes pooling with tears.

“Working as archbishop is so hard! I just wish I had someone to dote on me sometimes! Waaaah!”

“Alfoncina, is this what happens when you get affectionate? Are you the crying-drunk type?”

Her personality was so different from what it normally was that Ryouta was getting confused.

“I’m scared… I wish I could run away sometimes… I’m so tired… *Hic… Sniff.*”

“It’s okay, there’s nothing to be afraid of. Everyone’s here to help you. Calm down now…”

“But the manga work is almost thirty times more busy and painful!”

“You aren’t balancing your work at all!”

“I know… I’m so busy. Maybe it’s time I step down as archbishop…”

“You should quit doing manga instead! You can’t quit being archbishop!”

“I’ve been working hard for twenty-one years now, so maybe it’ll be okay to announce my retirement on account of burnout…”

“Hey, you’re a teenager! When have you worked for twenty-one years?!”

“Just indulge me please… Okay…? Is that okay?” she wheedled. This wasn’t fair.

“Fine, fine, I’ll indulge you all you like…”

“Hic, hic… Zzz, zzz…”

As he soothed her, she eventually fell asleep—maybe all her crying had tired her out.

“That was a shock. I’d never seen that side of her before…”

Ryouta wriggled around and managed to get his legs free, then rolled to the side of the bed.

“Please don’t let anyone else come, please…”

Clack.

The door opened once again.

“Are you awake, Ryouta?” “Sorry for bothering you so late…”

It was Shiren and Tamaki.

They must have just come out of the bath; both Shiren’s long pigtails and Tamaki’s black hair were a bit damp.

Two of them at the same time? I really hope they’re not under the effects of the toxin…

“There’s something we’d like to talk to you about, Ryouta,” Shiren announced, marching into the room.

There was a meek look on Tamaki’s face as well.

“What is it?”

“Who would you pick—me or Tamaki?”

“What kind of quiz is this?!”

He had no idea what exactly she meant by “pick.” It didn’t matter what she meant, though, because all those meanings were bad.

Now that he looked closer at them, he didn’t see any shred of rational thought left in their eyes. The mushrooms again.

“Ryouta, I know Tamaki drank your blood once.”

Oops.

That was indeed something that had happened.

“Outwardly, you’re my minion. That said, it isn’t official. So if you’re planning on picking Tamaki, then I’d like to hear you say that out loud right now.”

A rather weighty question had been presented to him.

They shouldn’t be talking about something so important while they were essentially drugged, but that was the only reason they’d brought it up at all.

“Please make a choice, Ryouta… Of course, I won’t mind if you say to me, *Get out of here, trash*. You know me—I don’t have any big expectations. But if, *if* there’s a chance we can be together, then I’ll do all I can to work hard for you…,” Tamaki said feverishly. Or maybe she had a literal fever.

“Well, it’s obvious that Ryouta’s going to pick me, his master.”

“No, sorry to be forward, but neither of us can guarantee that will happen,” Tamaki said back. That was unusual.

“Hey, what on Earth does that mean, Tamaki?!”

“Because if you two were that in love with each other, then things would never have come to this.”

“Not true! Ryouta and I aren’t bound by love, but by something else—like loyalty! That’s all!”

“Then you can have the loyalty, so please allow me to take the love. I would be perfectly happy with that alone…”

“How casually brazen of you, Tamaki! But there’s no way I could give that to you!”

“Indeed. It’s Ryouta who is making the decision.”

It was slowly becoming a bloodbath in here.

“Hmph! It’s still obvious he’s going to pick me!”

“No, he will pick me!”

“No, me!”

“Me!”

Shiren and Tamaki took one big step closer to Ryouta.

“What are you going to do, Ryouta?”

They were rapidly closing in on him.

Ryouta took a step back and fell, sitting onto the bed. He couldn’t retreat any farther.

Shiren and Tamaki settled on either side, sandwiching him.

I’ll just have to give a safe answer here…

This had been the scariest development so far. The pressure on him was unbearable.

“Look, I’m Shiren’s minion, and I know I have to serve my master well __”

“Who cares about service right now?!”

He’d tried a defensive play, but it was shot down immediately.

“The question is—who between me and Tamaki are you going to choose?! Who cares about service and minions?! If that’s the problem here, then I’d serve you, Ryouta!” Shiren yelled with panic in her voice.

Even though this was all the poison’s fault, he could easily tell that those were her true feelings.

“Now give us your answer.” She reached out to put her hand on his collar, the proof that he was her minion.

“Yes, Ryouta, put an end to this!”

They both shoved their faces close to his. He desperately tried to find ways he could end this situation peaceably, but he couldn't think of anything.

Then at the last moment, he got the perfect idea.

"Uhh, well… This is an important question, so I might have to give you my answer in another three days…"

His strategy was to put off his conclusion until long after the effects of the mushrooms had worn off.

Pretty clever, if I do say so myself! That should get me through this!

"I see, so he can't choose one over the other." "He cannot find an answer, can he?"

Yes, exactly!

"Which means he wants both of us." "We tied for first place."

"How did you jump to *that* conclusion?!"

He felt them grab each of his arms, right and left.

"I will do literally anything and everything for you all of the time, Ryouta… I might gross you out, but I will make sure you feel good…" With her free hand, Tamaki began unbuttoning her shirt.

"You don't need to do any of that! I mean it!"

"Hmm. F-fine, then I'll just have to do better…" Shiren also began to unsteadily remove her skirt.

"Stop! We're all going to regret this later, so cut this out right now!"

"Cut what out, Ryouta…? Do you mean you'd find it hotter if I left my shirt on…?"

"Don't ask me these things!"

"Oh, that's right… Which manga do you like from *Kairakuten*?"

"You can't seriously think that's a good way to ask what turns me on!"

"Then shall we buy a video card and have a look?"

"I mean it, you don't need to check!"

"All right, Tamaki, whoever turns Ryouta on wins."

"Don't put stupid rules in place!"

"Shall I massage you with my underwear right after I take it off, Ryouta?"

"I really don't know how to answer that kind of proposition! I am not that perverted!"

But once they had stripped down to their underwear—

"Oh, I'm sleepy…" *"Yaaawn…"*

—both of them fell asleep. At last, Ryouta was saved.

He sighed and removed the rope binding him.

It had loosened when Tamaki tried to take off his clothes and had come off more easily than he had thought. That was the one silver lining of this situation. He would hate to spend the whole night tied up.

"That was close, but I think most people have fallen asleep now… Wait, there's still—"

"—Me left."

Ouka slowly entered the room.

She got here before I could escape…

The first words that popped into Ryouta's head were *final boss*.

"Ouka, those poison mushrooms have made a real mess here. You've had some, too, so go back to your room and go to sleep."

"Oh? I'm fine. I took the antidote beforehand."

"What…?"

Ouka chuckled triumphantly. "Everyone always pays attention to the bashful part of the bashful shroom, but the sleep-inducing effect that comes right afterward is more important."

"There you go, plotting again… But I guess you'd never throw a party for free, would you? There's always a catch."

"How cheap do you think I am?! It is true that the other party was canceled! And we weren't getting the money back, cancellation or no, so I put together this little event! Otherwise, I wouldn't have done anything since it'd be a waste!"

"You *are* cheap! You got mad at me for being right!"

It was very unfair for her to be upset with him.

"But why on Earth did you do all this…?"

Her motivations didn't really add up.

"Can't you figure it out…?" Ouka's eyes darted around aimlessly. "I thought this would let us have a calm chat together… I barely get any time off, you know."

Oh yeah, we have known each other for a long time…

They had been friends back in elementary school, and by the time they'd reunited, Ouka had become the leader of another country.

Even though they were classmates now, they still didn't have any time

for idle chatter just between the two of them like they used to.

And maybe that would never change so long as she bore the title of emperor.

"This room is full of bodies."

"And that's your fault…"

Everyone who had come in to show Ryouta affection and then promptly fell asleep were all scattered throughout the room. And then there was the one unconscious after taking a fall.

"We can't have a nice easy chat in a place like this."

"Yeah, the population density's a little high in here…"

"Th-then…why not come to my room? I have drinks ready for us…"

Ouka's voice suddenly jumped an octave.

She's nervous about something… Wait, but…

Something was unnerving Ryouta, too.

"You didn't put any weird traps in your room or anything again, did you?"

"I've done no such thing! What are you going to do? Are you coming? Or not? Make up your mind! It's making me feel awkward!" Ouka complained, her face red.

Ryouta didn't have the courage to joke about her blushing for no reason.

"You're right… I'll come over, then. If you don't mind…"

"I don't… It's better that way…"

"But being alone together in the same room is kind of…y'know…"

"I-it's all right… Because I know you're a gentleman, Ryouta… You won't try anything funny…"

"That's nice of you to say…"

"B-but… You have to follow my rules when you're in my room… I'm the emperor, after all…"

"Status-wise, at least…"

The two gradually made their way toward the corridor.

But then there came a powerful sense of bloodlust.

Oh no, is there an assassin somewhere in the building?

It was so strong that even Ryouta sensed it right away.

It was right behind them.

Someone behind them really wanted someone dead.

That's right, the most important person…Ouka, the emperor, is basically

without protection here… If there really was an assassin, then…

This could be a crisis leading to the destruction of the Empire.

No—who cared about the Empire? Ouka's life was in danger.

Ouka, I will protect you, no matter what…

When he turned around…

…he saw it was Sasara.

She'd gotten to her feet, looking almost like a zombie.

"Hey, weren't you aslee—?"

"It smells…like…Lady Ouka…"

Well yeah, obviously, she's right there—was what Ryouta was thinking, just as Sasara leaped at Ouka.

"Lady Ouka! Let us love each other forever both in our dreams and in our reality!"

"What is going on?! I've never heard of the affection effect being so powerful that it shakes off the induced sleep!"

It seemed like the bashful potency remained even after losing consciousness. And because Ouka had passed by, Sasara had woken up.

"Using normally unharnessed subconscious power, I have managed to stand! All for my love for Lady Ouka!"

"Hey! It's not fair to cheat with the power of love!"

"Love makes the world go 'round, Lady Ouka. Love is limitless."

"I'm saying it's cheating! Go to sleep!"

"Forgive my rudeness, Lady Ouka!" Sasara leaped at Ouka, like a carnivore attacking its prey, and straddled her.

When their eyes met, Ouka realized something.

This was bad. It was impossible to tell if Sasara was in a sleepy haze or still under the effects of the bashful shroom, but either way, she was unable to control herself.

"Oh, Sasara. Anything more than this is forbidden. This is really, really bad, like lèse-majesté bad. Like R18+ bad, like—ah, ahh…"

Ouka's clothes were already disheveled. Her underwear was visible.

Ryouta, frozen in shock from the sudden turn of events, finally snapped back to his senses.

He had to stop them; otherwise, there would be trouble… Things were already bad.

"They may both be girls, but I have to help her… Hey, Sasara, get out of

there."

Ryouta moved forward to pull Sasara away.

"I WILL KILL ANYONE WHO GETS IN MY WAY."

Her glare was so intense that someone with a weak heart would probably die from shock.

O-oh, there's the bloodlust I sensed earlier…

"Begone. If you interrupt me, I will kill you. I mean it! I will risk my life to live in this moment! I do not care if I die afterward! In fact, dying in the act would be like dying in heaven!"

She expressed her rock-solid determination, though this was completely the wrong time and place for that…

Ryouta hesitated.

Would he steel himself, too, and risk dying to save Ouka?

Or would he give up and get out of there?

It wouldn't be very manly of me if I couldn't save my own childhood friend—

"Ryouta Fuyukura! You are greatly mistaken if you think your lukewarm ideas of justice can get in the way of my long-cherished desires! Little things like common sense and morality will mean nothing in the face of my fury!"

"That's an absurd thing to be so valiant about!"

"If you want to stop me, then you may as well draw my own blade and cut me down right now! But I will not stop until you do! I will not stop until I die! That is the resolve of a knight!"

"I think you've misinterpreted something there!"

There was…nothing he could do to stop her.

They're both girls, so they probably don't mind. This is just girls being close, Ryouta explained to himself.

"Right, I guess I'll sleep in the ballroom downstairs tonight. The floor might be a little cold, but I don't think a guy could sleep in this room, so it's not like I have a choice. Yeah."

And he honestly thought he would be killed if he tried to go against Sasara.

"Hey, Ryouta, wait, wa—"

"I can't hear you; I can't hear anything…"

“Hey—Sasara! Don’t take…any more off… Ah…”

Ryouta left the room without looking back.

It wasn’t his fault.

It was the world’s fault.

No, actually, it was clearly Sasara’s fault.

The next morning, everyone was having breakfast together.

“*Sigh*... I feel so sluggish…”

Ouka, for some reason, seemed really tired.

“If I may, Lady Ouka, did something happen? You have been sighing this whole time,” Sasara asked with a bright smile; there was no malice behind it.

It didn’t seem like anyone remembered any of the things they said or did while under the effects of the bashful shrooms.

It was unclear as to why everyone had been in Ryouta’s room and why Ryouta himself had been sleeping downstairs, but there was a tacit agreement among all of them not to touch on the subject, considering things might get a little sticky.

“You seem happy, Sasara.”

“Yes, I had quite the fantastic dream. Would you like to hear it, Lady Ouka?”

“Do not tell me under any circumstances.”

“I’ll give you a hint: You and I—”

“Seriously, say nothing! And you’d better forget about it, ASAP!”

Ouka sounded frightened when she spoke.

Only Sasara, who had woken up again to act, seemed to vaguely remember the night before.

“No chance. I wrote it down in story form on my computer before I forgot about it.”

“You get to work way too quickly!”

“It was the perfect length for a novella, so I think I might send it in and try for a new author’s award.”

“I don’t want to hear anymore. I seriously don’t want to hear about this…”

Ouka was shaking. She was probably thinking about what she would do

if it got published…

“Hey, Ryouta.”

Ryouta jumped when Ouka said his name.

At the end of the day (or night), he had abandoned her to her fate, so it felt like he was sitting on needles.

“What is it, Ouka…?’

“It’s bad to trick people, isn’t it…?” Ouka murmured, looking unusually worn out.

“Y-yeah. You should never resort to using poison…”

Ryouta and Ouka sighed at the same time.

““Sigh…””

AFTERWORD

Nice to see you again. It's me, Kisetsu Morita.

The story is finally reaching its culmination! There will be slight spoilers below, so if you haven't read the book yet, please skip over this section.

Shiren's mother, Sairi, finally reveals herself. And then there's Ouka's mother, Ominaeshi. The truth of the tragedy in their past finally comes to light…! And what decision will Shiren make after Sairi asks her to return to Japan with her…? That's the story we are dealing with this time, probably. It hasn't been this serious since Volume 1. I feel like we've come full circle.

I don't feel like tiptoeing around spoilers for Volume 6, so I'm going to change the topic a little.

You Call That Service? Nico Plus is now on sale!

The serialized spin-off by Toshiko Machida is finally being brought to print in February! Bonus pages you can't read in the Niconico Manga version have been added, so it's a must-have!

To be honest, having Ms. Machida create a different story in parallel with me has been an incredible stimulus. Her setting for the Virginal Father, especially, was one I borrowed heavily from and then incorporated into my own story. You could even say that this light novel series is a kind of cocreation between Ms. Machida and myself. I am eternally grateful.

The serialization by urute is still on-going in Age Premium. Don't miss that one, either! Compared with the original story, urute's Shiren and Ouka are alluring and enchanting in a whole new way. I love them so much.

And finally, my thanks.

I know it was tough with all the new characters, but thank you so much, Mr. Ozaki, for the beautiful and amazing illustrations. Both of our new characters are in their thirties, and I think the real world would have a bright future ahead of it if people in their thirties were all this powerful and beautiful.

And of course, I always find my strength in my editors, the sales team, all those working at the bookstores, and all of you, my readers.

With your strength, I hope to work hard on this series for just a little longer, and I hope you stick along for the ride!

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It's hard work taking it slow...

After living a painful life as an office worker, Azusa ended her short life by dying from overworking. So when she found herself reincarnated as an undying, unaging witch in a new world, she vows to spend her days stress free and as pleasantly as possible. She ekes out a living by hunting down the easiest targets—the slimes! But after centuries of doing this simple job, she's ended up with insane powers... how will she maintain her low key life now?!

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